



**Alicorn book
compilation**

Alicorn

Specter Sanctuary

"I demand proof of archival of Forrest Tobith," Sonnet said.

The system caught her request. It had been fifteen minutes since she'd last asked for Mr. Tobith, so it allowed it without flagging anything for human review. There appeared a man, half-naked, frantic, his eyes looking for a moment in the wrong place for Sonnet because she'd taken a step to the left in the last fifteen minutes. "-me! Please!"

"Who is your next of kin?" said Sonnet.

"What? How is that -"

And he was gone again. Sonnet groaned. Noted the time. Checked her chart.

"I demand proof of archival of Easter Davis."

Easter had been archived in the middle of having a seizure. Sonnet didn't try to talk to her; she wasn't done having it yet.

"I demand proof of archival of Jesús Garcia."

"Specify further," said the system. Sonnet had been trying for the last four days to get it to let her specify up front, but no one in the user interface department cared about making this easy.

"Archival date October 9."

And there he appeared, expecting Sonnet a step to the right of where she was, crashing through empty space with his hands stretched out claw-like. He snarled, and pivoted, and lunged, and disappeared. She took another long sidestep.

"I demand proof of archival of Jesús Garcia."

"Specify further."

"Archival date October 16."

They didn't look much alike, the two Garcias. This one wasn't violent. "- is Maria, but there's got to be thousands!"

"What's her birthdate?" said Sonnet.

"Come again?"

He was gone. She made a note. She demanded proof of archival of another twenty people, and circled back around, after fifteen minutes, to Forrest Tobith.

"- important?" he said, double-taking when he discovered she'd moved again.

"So they can work on appealing your case or getting you transferred," Sonnet said, talking as quickly as she could.

" *Transferred!* Fuck -"

She had a checkbox for that, in the chart. She ticked it. She had an hour and a half left on the clock. Six more snippets with each of her assigned unfortunates and she could go home for the day. Maybe Easter would have time to finish her seizure and they could start talking, the next day. Maybe she would be able to get Forrest's next of kin's name.

"Hey, Sonnet. How'd archive-shaking go?" asked Brayden.

"I've got nine next of kins," she said. "Which will probably turn into six or seven of them once we actually track the people down and some of them won't go to bat. Did I win?"

"Nope. I've got eleven new names for your list." Brayden sent them to her chart. Sonnet groaned. "It could be worse," Brayden said. "Imagine if we actually had a complete list of *everybody* they were archiving."

"If we had that we might be able to toss the media relations guy something tasty," Sonnet said, flopping onto the couch in Brayden's office. "Don't you think?"

"Never change, Sonnet," he said, wistfully weary.

She looked over the eleven new names. Eleven strangers, archived in the middle of the least socially acceptable minutes of their lives. If she was lucky, one or two of them would be noticed missing by their families or friends before she clocked in the next morning and she'd never meet them. Somebody in charge of donor relations and public support would follow up later, asking: what if you hadn't found out? What if you hadn't happened to have plans together - what if you thought they'd blown you off - what if you'd had a fight, and thought you'd never heard from them again because they'd *decided* you should never hear from them again. The only way you'd ever know that they got suspended from the server, if that happened, would be because Sonnet heard about it, and spent five-second increments with your aunt or your brother or your daughter, until she got your name. Volunteer with us. Probably not at Sonnet's specific job. Or give us money.

And then they'd say: *hell* no. My cousin, my father, my aunt, isn't a *griever*. This was a misunderstanding. I still want *real* troublemakers off the server. How can you possibly defend such people. I heard one of them was archived for exposing himself to a minor. I heard that most archival's are of people who've got records a mile long, they just can't learn to live with other people. I heard they can all just be transferred to the ghost town server, what are you doing advocating for them to be here in Deidre Park with ordinary decent people? Archival's completely humane, anyway, my grandpa, my

nephew, my wife, is completely fine, and not traumatized at all, and anyway anyone worth getting out of the archives *would* have someone looking out for them.

But every now and then there would be someone who'd toss them a payment for the counterfactual service, and the Society for Impartial Continuity could go on hiring Sonnet for another day to pull archives and, moment by moment, extract the names. And send someone to look them up. And find that half of them were underspecified, or on do-not-disturb, or *also* archived. Or they'd moved to another server and they automatically filtered out messages from abroad. Or they thought that being archived would, somehow, teach their wayward loved ones a lesson if they cooled their heels for a few years that felt like a few minutes.

"Did you still want me for the lobbying dinner?" Sonnet asked.

"Yeah, Becca couldn't make it and I'm not going through that alone. The food'll be good."

"No, the food'll be inedible culinary experiments plated like it's fine art, but that's fine. Give me a five minute warning when we need to leave."

Five minutes, when the time came, was enough for Sonnet to change into something tolerably fancy for the atmosphere of the restaurant, look at the menu (it was, in the current fashion, vaguer than vague - no ingredients, just "light and bright, with a radiant crunch" or "mysterious yet tannic fusion experience"), and skim her notes on the lobbying effort.

Brayden would do most of the talking, but Sonnet had to be on-message if she did say anything: their current procedures only covered archivals that they knew about. They didn't have access to the system records directly. A lot of their information relied on permissions to check up on their "frequent fliers", who'd been archived before and wanted to be sure of getting noticed if it

happened again. (There had been a protracted legal battle about whether subscribing to the SIC's check-in service was admissible evidence in judicial hearings. At the moment it was not.) The Society also employed watchbots that checked physics for disappearances and tried to filter out normal teleportation, scanned publicly-visible moderator calls, and took aggregate data from people's openly visible postings about who they expected where.

Sometimes Sonnet asked for proof of archival of someone, and the system wouldn't prove it.

This was *probably* always because the person she asked for wasn't in fact archived because they were instead conscious. But sometimes she wasn't one hundred percent sure.

Hence the lobbying. A small ask, nothing gamechanging. They were already entitled to ask for proof of everyone they knew about in the archives. They just wanted to make sure that "everyone they knew about" was "everyone".

Sonnet sort of dreaded winning the argument. She'd be spending years explaining things to people who'd been in there for decades, trying to dig up their estranged families so her co-workers could go beg them to give a shit. Ultimately anyone they hadn't heard about yet would probably wind up in Specter Sanctuary - "ghost town" - the only server with no standards.

There was some kind of irony in the fact that she wouldn't wish Specter Sanctuary even on any of the people who made it the way it was.

Sonnet and Brayden teleported in to dinner with cheery salesy smiles on, and shook hands with the junior moderation assistants whose time they'd scored. Sonnet ordered a "crisp and daring bowlful of color". She got a chopped salad. She could have been eating pizza at home.

Brayden handled most of the small talk. Sonnet nodded and laughed at the right moments. Eventually - she couldn't tell if Brayden was doing this to her on purpose or not - she wound up in a side conversation with Vivi, one of the moderators.

"So how long have *you* been with the Society?" Vivi asked.

Vivi had ordered "savory, decadent, and aromatic comfort", which had gotten her a bowl of cheese-smothered onion soup, and Sonnet envied her. But Sonnet could get a pizza after she was done working. She smiled instead. "I volunteered for two years, first, and I got hired full-time about seven years ago," she replied. "I've always thought that moderation archival is a tool that needs to be used - well - *moderately* . In a perfect world I imagine we'd be working a lot more closely with your team. It'd be a two step process - archive the disruptive server member, and then follow up to find out how they can have continuation while imposing fewer costs on their neighbors. Right now Step One is barely talking to Step Two and I'm sure a lot of people have fallen through the cracks."

"A lot of them are going to wind up being repeat offenders, though, not 'imposing fewer costs'," said Vivi. She slurped her soup. A droplet landed on her collar and vanished, cleaned up by either an ambient effect of the restaurant or something programmed directly into the blouse fabric.

"Of course if someone goes to your appeals board on behalf of a loved one it is completely within your power to refuse them," said Sonnet. One didn't call people "the moral equivalent of an executioner" over a polite lobbyist dinner. One didn't even let the thought touch one's expression. "We're not asking for any great laxity of standards in who gets to rejoin Deidre Park's commonwealth. Nor for you to give a dishonest badge of approval to Park members who want to emigrate to other strict-conduct-standards servers. We just want to know who's in the archive."

"So you can send their parents or their equally obnoxious friends to hassle us," said Vivi. She said it like it was a light in-joke that Sonnet was expected to get, could be counted on to take gently. Did becoming a moderator make people act that way or did they just recruit the ones who already did? Some moderators were stern and formal and never let anyone forget that they had power, and that wasn't good either, but in the moment Sonnet would have traded Vivi for one of those.

"Oh," said Sonnet, "I expect that for a lot of the ones we'd turn up this way, we won't be able to find anyone with standing to make an appeal. But we'd be able to find out more information, and maybe start the process to get them rehomed on Specter Sanctuary."

"Is that even... better?" asked Vivi, dubious.

"If it's not, they can voluntarily self-archive," said Sonnet. "Most people don't. And the Sanctuary does have pretty robust blocking features." This was what made it so "ghostly". Most servers had standards. Specter Sanctuary had shadowbanning, no-notification omission of offensive people from your entire sensorium. They'd still move objects, but you could be sitting in the same place as them on a park bench and not realize it until they put down their bag and it appeared beside you. The physics exceptions were far more computationally expensive there than they were in normal places that didn't have to so aggressively manage race conditions.

"It'd have to!" agreed Vivi. "Deidre Park isn't like that. Everyone here needs to buy in to the social contract. Most people we archive have three strikes, sometimes even more."

Deidre Park had children in it. It had a mental hospital. It had exceptions to most of its public disturbance statutes for political demonstrations, art projects, ignorance of the law, and April Fool's Day. But sure. Everyone needed to buy in to the social contract. "Most of them certainly have strikes," Sonnet agreed. "Again, I'm not

petitioning for any exceptional release. We just need their names so they can go through the usual channels."

"I know you probably spend every working hour with this population and you get used to them, but the behavior that gets us called in is pretty extreme," said Vivi.

"A lot of the appeals *are* granted, when we get to the point of connecting an archived citizen with someone who can -" Sonnet said, against her better judgment.

"Oh, sure, but a lot of that is because the person who does their appeal has to indicate that they're aware of the problem and they'll be taking some responsibility for managing it, and impressing the seriousness of the situation on their loved one," Vivi said. "I think that with a complete list of names you'd mostly talk to the same number of, let's say *successes* ? And a lot more dead ends who just don't have an avenue to improvement within the environs of Deidre Park."

"You're probably right," Sonnet said around a too-fixed smile. And then one of the other moderators had a question for Vivi, and the side-conversation was broken up and Sonnet could step back into the sidelines, where she wouldn't get any closer to breaking down into tears at people whose help she needed.

The dinner ended, and Sonnet was free at last. Free to teleport home. Free to order pizza, piping hot and oozy, with mushrooms and sausage. Free to holler at her wall in an ineffectual gesture of frustration.

Nobody died any more but that moderators like Vivi killed them, safe in the knowledge that there was no blood, no body, and - often as not - no evidence.

Sonnet got Easter Davis the rest of the way through her epileptic attack and got a name from her. Easter had a good shot at being found to have been *wrongfully* archived. Somebody had reported the disturbance, not recognizing a seizure - most people could get that fixed in the modern day, and Sonnet didn't know why Easter hadn't, but that was between Easter and her neurologist. The moderators had noted that Easter didn't respond to their commands and also didn't recognize that it was a medical problem. They didn't check her metadata to see the responsibly emplaced note explaining her condition.

If it was formally recognized that Easter wasn't just possible to let out under greater family-and-friend supervision, but that she should never have been interpreted as a disturbance of the peace in the first place, that would clear Easter's name. It'd get the moderator in question reprimanded. And it would probably get Sonnet (or, hopefully, Brayden instead) a meeting with whoever had made the call.

Sonnet sort of wished she could arrange some sort of quid pro quo with the moderator who'd archived Easter. "I get it, you're understaffed and overworked," she'd say. Empathetically. After all, Sonnet's workplace was pretty lean too. "You didn't know what you were looking at. I understand and I don't think you necessarily ought to get in trouble for it. You're a good mod," she would lie. "But we're the ones picking up after your mistakes, and we need the data to do it with. How about we don't make a fuss about this, and you tell us who we're missing, in the archives."

But this was impossible, because Sonnet couldn't give marching orders to Easter, let alone Easter's entire social circle, and it was Easter's right to complain and then the senior moderation team and the people they reported to in the government all would know about it. It was not in Sonnet's power to offer anything to the mods, except maybe not going to the media herself should Easter decline to do so.

Sonnet got through the rest of her workday, the vast backlog of names. Some of them had priors, and the Society for Impartial Continuity had their next-of-kin information from the last time they'd been archived. Sometimes those next-of-kin had given up. Jesús Garcia (archival date October 9) was one of those. They'd processed him for the first time ten years ago and his father had gotten him out. Then his sister. Then his niece. Most recently his drinking buddy had flaked and they'd prevailed on his niece again but she'd made it clear it was the last time, and now he had no one. Jesús Garcia (archival date October 9) had experienced six months of the last decade and he was out of next-of-kins who'd appeal for him, and they were going to have to get him transferred to Specter Sanctuary.

In theory this should have been easy. Specter Sanctuary had no requirements for residency. It was funded with charity dollars - often Sonnet's own charity dollars, since there was some conflict of interest in donating her salary back to the very organization that paid her. And Deidre Park was not very troubled about the fates of the archived citizenry. But there were a lot of regulations and, underlying those regulations, code safeties, around transferring people across servers. A conscious person could acknowledge all the obligatory consent forms and make sure they trusted their carrier and their destination server and their backup arrangement. Accidents with data in transit were rare, and irretrievable ones rarer still.

An unconscious person could not make these decisions for themselves, and however little regard the authorities might have for whether the archived ever got to experience their lives, anything that risked data loss was still treated seriously. Every single transfer to Specter Sanctuary required a lot of back-and-forth with the automated and human watchdogs designed to obstruct people from sending their enemies on a file transfer to nowhere, or prevent children from casually mailing themselves to Grandma. It had to be established that they could not continue to live on their present server, with exhaustive documentation of their rap sheet and every

possible next-of-kin and erstwhile friend and their stances on the matter. No expense could be spared in getting the transfer and backup arrangements with the highest safety scores from the most reputable agencies, no matter that these ratings were mostly based on skill at interfacing with the raters. It signified more about slick reports and cheerful slideshows showcasing their compliance, rather than any numerical advantages in terms of getting data from point A to point B.

If Sonnet could just pick up and *move* all this concern for the welfare of the archived she'd find a hundred better places to put it.

Specter Sanctuary couldn't afford to pay for immigrants' transfer fees unless its endowment somehow trebled, so Deidre Park had to foot the bill. Deidre Park did not have much reason to want to do that. Archival was cheap. Static data, backed up, validated responsibly, and ignored.

The Society for Impartial Continuity did their part to make it more expensive by demanding proof of archival for every name they had. But that was a smallish recurring expense, not a large lump sum - and, too, the savings wouldn't materialize for any given transfer to the Sanctuary. Sonnet worked for as many hours as she was paid for, and occasionally more. She asked for as many proofs as she could during that time, usually focusing on a subset of the available archived per day so that she could track the different fragmentary conversations better. With Jesús Garcia (archival date October 9) out of Deidre Park, she'd spend that much more time with everyone else, and they'd have to cover about the same cost of materializing and re-archiving someone every few seconds for her. Unless they managed to get the (known) archived population down so low that the fifteen minute limit actually enforced downtime, which they weren't anywhere near.

Some days Sonnet "won" - cleared out more people from the archive than they discovered to have been added. Most days she lost.

Anyway, Jesús Garcia (archival date October 9) had eventually given up attacking her, come down a little off the drugs, and given his (broken across three proofs, and heavily padded with swearing) assent to go to the Sanctuary. That made things easier, and also meant she didn't have to try to talk to him again unless there was information they couldn't get from his niece or the server records.

Sonnet was eager for the weekend.

She'd gone back and forth with herself about taking weekends. Brayden didn't, but he worked fewer hours per day; he just needed to be available on short notice for the public-facing aspects of his job, answering messages and responding quickly to news. It didn't matter to the archived people's experience of being archived - she'd show up in a new outfit every few hundred proofs, whether she'd skipped days in between or not. Anyone whose loved ones were aware of and hopping mad about their archival could probably handle it without Society help. Almost by design, no one was *waiting* on her.

Still, she was forever drawing mental analogies between being archived and being dead, and she felt like on some level she wasn't taking it as seriously as all that, if she didn't operate in crisis mode all the time. The inherent contradiction between "crisis" and "all the time" wasn't lost on her. The fact that she was always two days in the hole every Monday wasn't either.

They needed more people to make a real dent. Two more days of Sonnet per week, even if she could keep up a no-weekend schedule - and she probably couldn't - wouldn't outperform another staffer.

And they could probably afford it soon, too, maybe not this year but soon. The Society had been operating long enough that its recurring donations from a small fraction of the people it served had begun adding up. They could promote one of the volunteers, but... none of the volunteers who did Sonnet's work stood out. They never, ever

won, even if you amortized their performance to their shorter periods of time spent collecting proofs. There were chapters of the Society operating on other servers, but she didn't think any of them were so flush with competent people that they'd export one, even aside from the thing where moving to a new server was massively inconvenient for all of one's social relationships. And most of the volunteers weren't long-termers. It'd be a feature of their lives for a year, or five, and then they'd have a kid or a new job or a few scheduling conflicts in a row and stop coming.

All these things burdened Sonnet's mind as she attempted to settle in to her beach weekend. She was sort of optimistic about Easter generating positive attention, and the right kind of publicity sometimes spooked help out of unrelated industries. Sonnet had been a hardware liaison once, dedicated to communicating between Deidre Park and the people who maintained the physical, base-reality architecture on which it was all housed, its offsite backups and its fire suppression systems and its updates and upgrades and rollbacks and coolants and wires and airgaps and all those essentials. It was important work, keeping those lines open; but it was *obviously* important, the sort of thing that never lacked for funding and qualified applicants. She'd never worried about the fate of the server after shifting her attention to the Society. And it had been a news story about a released archived person, Brayden's personal efforts back when the Deidre Park chapter was more of a one-man operation, which had attracted her.

...beach. She was going to the beach. Right.

Deidre Park had eleven beaches, which was not very many for a server of its size and broad appeal. Obviously a server founded and designed by the surfing-obsessed would have hundreds, and a server that was intended as a contemplative retreat for eighteen nuns would probably have zero, or maybe one depending on the nature of the nuns and their contemplations. Deidre Park was a really generic all-purpose residential server, notwithstanding

occasional stabs at distinguishing itself with aggressive holiday celebrations and heavy-handed attempts at encouraging quirky-yet-anodyne cultural habits. It happened to have more mountains than beaches, more waterfalls than islands, more evergreens than deciduous, all minor decisions made timidly enough by the original architects to leave it noncommittal and average.

Sonnet liked the beach, though, so she spent her weekend at one, swimming, napping in the sunshine, collecting hermit crabs out of tidepools and letting them crawl up her arm, crashing somebody's pickup volleyball game, building sandcastles. She got some reading done. She floated in the tide, staring up at the blue sky. There'd been a vote a few years back about changing the color of the sky, to make Deidre Park more interesting - "local color for local color", if she remembered the slogan right. It had been shot down by a landslide.

She kept thinking about work.

Once they got the Garcia transfer through, once Easter had made her decisions about how much complaining to do, once she was more on top of things -

She was never going to be more on top of things, and if they got anywhere with the lobbying she'd be snowed under worse than ever. The names that they *didn't* have, the ones they could only get from the admins, some of those people had probably been archived for decades. They were no way no how going to have next-of-kin who were eager to step in for them and make all the calls and attend all the meetings and fill out all the forms. If Sonnet were archived on trumped-up charges right here on this beach, and she somehow wasn't noticed missing at work, her brother would - well, her brother had moved to another server to be with his now-wife. But he'd still notice if she went *years* without responding to any messages, she thought.

Maybe Sonnet needed more friends. It was uncomfortable, realizing the extent to which her boss would be the first person to notice her missing, maybe the only one who'd spot it inside of six months. She went to places and did things, but not regularly or sociably enough...

No one was going to archive Sonnet, though. She was a peaceable law-abiding citizen. And even if in her occasional anxious daydreams she wondered if the Society was too big a thorn in the side of the authorities, they would certainly at least *try* telling them to disband or limit their activities before just summarily archiving all its employees.

...then what, though?

What, Sonnet wondered as she picked a boatful of sushi off the lazy river before her, would she do, if Deidre Park banned the Society?

She'd need a new job, at least if she wanted to have any money. Money was useful for things like the massage she'd booked for her evening, and being able to support Specter Sanctuary's operating costs. And her Deidre Park server rent, although if she went long enough without a job then the indigence fund would cover her, they didn't archive people just for being poor.

(That is, on Diedre Park, they didn't do that. They did archive people for delinquent rent on some servers, like the one where the Society had been founded. With several warnings and plenty of time to hustle to a different more forgiving home, but - that didn't always work. *Nothing* would *always* work.)

On Sonnet's second day at the beach she cracked and checked her work messages.

There was one from yesterday, courtesy of Brayden, chiding her for checking her messages on vacation - very funny, Brayden. There was a request from a journalist for a quote, but her inbox management software had marked it moot - probably the piece had

already gone up. It was *probably* good that they were fishing for quotes from the Society, but she refused to read the news from her beach towel and find out what they'd gotten from whoever they'd managed to speak to. She'd look at it on a workday, if not during work per se when she needed to be cycling people out of the archive.

This resolve lasted about forty-five seconds and then she went and looked up the article.

The headline read: *Specter Sanctuary Shutters*

...Sonnet was abruptly no longer interested in lounging on the beach at all. That was her crisis, right there. That was what every weekend she'd taken in her life had kept her fresh for.

She inventoried all her beach things in a jumble she'd have to sort out later. In a year, maybe. The *Sanctuary* !

She teleported straight to her office. Brayden would see her entrance on his notifications without her having to do anything about it, so she didn't greet him, just pulled up the article to read while changing into work clothes. She wasn't very good at multitasking, and wound up pulling shoes from her wardrobe that didn't match her slacks; it didn't matter. The rest of the article -

The vice-director of Specter Sanctuary, repository of last resort for people who cannot find another home that will accept them, has announced that the server will be shutting down permanently on November 19. The endowment's principal has at times not been code-protected against withdrawal, and to meet shortfalls in funding for assorted commitments (we have not been able to confirm rumors of other uses), the director of the server has been extracting funds from that principal rather than exclusively subsisting off the interest. Sources among supporters, donors, and even residents of the Sanctuary indicated that this was kept secret from all of them.

"They have to live here," said one resident who declined to be identified. "They can't get anyone good to run the place because they have to live here." Presumably referring to the Scottsdale Act, the commenter is correct; it's illegal for a server to be managed by someone whose primary residence is elsewhere. Neither hardware caretakers nor digital foreigners can serve in the role of server director (nor in several other positions enumerated in the law). The Act was originally put into place to protect server members from absentee landlords, like the proprietor of the now defunct Scottsdale server, who may have a purely mercenary investment in the quality of life on the server and the relationships with the hardware maintainers that keep it safe. Specter Sanctuary, a notoriously unpleasant place to live, appears to be a casualty of this regulation.

The Chronicle was not able to locate definitive information on the identity of the erstwhile manager of Specter Sanctuary. Apparently anonymous, this financial malefactor may no longer be among the "specters". The forthcoming shutdown of the Sanctuary was only made evident when automatic processes triggered the elevation of the vice-director. The Scottsdale Act does allow visits and vacations abroad, and it's not impossible that the director of record will return with some explanation, defense, or Hail Mary attempt to bail out the Sanctuary. But "that's not the way to bet," a source

Sonnet realized she was biting her own hand. She forced her jaw open and lowered her arm.

The Sanctuary - all those people, the outcasts of every server in the world, almost none of them with anywhere to go even if they were facing outright deletion. And someone had been drawing down the principal of the endowment without - starting a fundraising drive to top it off again? Without even notifying the donor base that they were having a tight month, a rough year? While the server continued to accept transfer after transfer, never paying the fees for the moves

but certainly paying for every clock-cycle of active residence and every exception in the physics model. If the Society had been a few days faster with Jesús Garcia (archival date October 9) he'd be there, already, waiting to see if anyone would save him or if the ship would sink with him and everyone else aboard. And no shortage of people just like him were already shipped out, and they'd be afraid - if they read the news. Or caught unawares, if they didn't - without the chance to check if their grandmothers and their old high school friends and their estranged children had blocked their messages too thoroughly to get an emergency distress call.

A server shutdown - like, apparently, Scottsdale, though the name wasn't familiar to Sonnet - was always dreadful. Depending on how big a server it was, and how tight the timeline of its evacuation, it could trigger physics rationing in a dozen others, locking people out of teleportation, time dilation, and exotic object or room or biology features they usually took for granted while the hardware worked to accommodate the increased population. Every person on the servers that shared a language and any common history with the dying one would be hosting a relative, or a friend, or a randomly assigned refugee they'd volunteered to put up.

Specter Sanctuary could probably stop existing overnight and none of that would happen, because nobody wanted to save them, and if anybody did, their servers would refuse. It would be the quietest, least obtrusive disaster -

Brayden peeked in her office door. He glanced at her shoes and wisely didn't comment. "Sonnet?"

"What are we doing about it?" she asked, getting up to pace. "We don't have anywhere near the money we'd need to spin up a replacement server - not even an *archive* server - not all the chapters across all the servers where the Society operates -"

"We don't," Brayden agreed softly. "I've written to the Deidre Park admins already and asked them if we can take in and archive anyone who's lived here in the past. I think they'll *probably* do that. It costs all our political capital and then some but they'll probably figure it's easy to spin well and go for it and then expect us to shut up about sharing their records or making proofs last longer or - anything on the wishlist."

"Most people in the Sanctuary never lived in Deidre Park."

"I also wrote to all the other chapters. They haven't gotten back to me, probably because getting back to me is not very important compared to talking to their own admins," Brayden said, "but when they have a minute they'll get the idea from me if they didn't have it themselves."

"There are hundreds of servers with no Society chapter operating at all!" exclaimed Sonnet.

"I know. Look, maybe you should go back to the beach -"

" *Brayden!* "

"It's not the kind of problem we're equipped to do anything about besides what I've already done. You shouldn't have checked your nonurgents. You know if there'd been anything I thought we needed you for, I could have gotten through to you vacation or no vacation."

Sonnet's teeth were clenched tight enough to make it hard to breathe. "- I'll go visit my brother," she said.

"- sure, if you prefer that to the beach -"

"Stan lives on Brook Crossing. They don't have a Society chapter. I'll make him pester his admins to make some room. Where else should I be going while you're on it here - did they ever get anything off the ground in Shelby or did the project collapse when Chase retired? -"

Brayden looked like he might have been about to object that she was supposed to be taking time off, but - no. He was as much a Society man as anyone. He'd been in it longer than Sonnet. "Shelby's got a chapter. But if you can get a visa to Lavender Isles, they don't."

"Brook Crossing, then Lavender Isles if there's time," nodded Sonnet. "Okay." She put in the request. She sent her brother a message informing him that she was coming over. Usually she'd arrange something months in advance, and get his confirmation first, but needs must.

Brook's Crossing was a college town. Stan didn't work at the university, but his wife did, and their teenage daughter Anthimeria aspired to attend - tuition was dramatically discounted for server natives. (The university administration was in tight coordination with the server administration, and a student who'd been born in Brook's Crossing didn't cost any more in upkeep if they were taking classes than if they weren't, while imports did.)

Sonnet had a standing visa because she had family who lived there, and didn't need to go through anything very elaborate to get herself transferred for a brief visit, just declare that she expected to leave again within the week and prove that all her insurance was topped up and pay for the data handling. When she teleported in to Brook's Crossing she landed on Stan's front walk, surrounded by her sister-in-law's thornless roses.

She wasn't sure if Stan was even home, but she knocked anyway.

The door opened to reveal Anthimeria.

Sonnet's niece looked nothing like her father. She and Sonnet saw one another once a year or so, but Anthimeria had of late taken to coloring her hair, and the pink was new; Anthimeria recognized

Sonnet first. "Aunt Sonnet, what are you doing here? I didn't know you were coming, did Dad forget to tell me?"

"No, this is an unannounced drop-in. Did I pick a bad time? When do you expect him home?"

"I don't know, in an hour or so? - is something wrong, you look super freaked out, come in and sit down."

Sonnet came in. She sat down. "It's a work thing, but it's a sudden crisis of a work thing. Is he doing something he can't be interrupted at or could I go wherever he's at, or ask him to hurry home -"

"You could just tell *me* what it is," Anthimeria pointed out.

Anthimeria was - Sonnet did some arithmetic - fifteen. Sonnet personally thought that somebody a thousand years old would be too young to learn about total annihilation of the self, but since that was not a luxury she could pursue in the general case, maybe fifteen would be fine. "Specter Sanctuary was mismanaged into the ground. Doesn't have enough money. It's going to shut down after a very short grace period and the people on it almost by definition have nowhere else to go. My boss is getting our admins to - well, is trying to get our admins to - accommodate anyone who's from Deidre Park, in the archive, where they can at least wait until someone starts up a successor server. But there's not a chapter of the Society for Impartial Continuity here to work on it, so I came to ask your dad to hassle the Brook's Crossing admins about taking some of them. - and now that I think about it the code for the environment needs to be saved, too, if anyone's going to spin up a successor, the blocking technology is indispensable and I don't think anywhere else has it -"

"Holy cow," said Anthimeria, "servers can *do* that?"

"Apparently!" said Sonnet, flinging up her hands. "Apparently servers can do that!"

"But like - what, are they going to *delete* entire *people* - they can't do that!"

Sonnet wobbled a hand. "The grace period will end and the server will shut down but they won't *instantly* reallocate the storage space. But it'll be basically impossible without some novel legalistic finagling to get anyone off there. It's hard enough when you want to transport an archived person who's on the same server as you. Grabbing a person who's, not even archived, but in complete stasis, environment and all... I don't know if the lawyers would be faster than the vultures who'd want to buy up the space."

"How many people are there on - you said it's called Specter Sanctuary?"

"Thousands. It pulls from every server. It's been in operation for a long time. I don't know how many admins it went through before the latest one wrecked the endowment that funded it, probably dozens, it must burn people out really quickly." Sonnet was staring at Anthimeria's shoes. They were white, and clung close to the ankle with no fasteners - a kind that would be very hard to put on or take off if they didn't have physics exceptions programmed in. People on Specter Sanctuary couldn't afford more physics exceptions, by and large. Some of them were able to do some remote work, but most of it was taxed away to keep the server going. (And it hadn't even done that.) They could not have shoes like Anthimeria's. Insult to injury, Sonnet supposed.

"Can't somebody - get a loan, or something, and take over the server?" Anthimeria asked.

"Maybe," said Sonnet. "I mean, I'm not sure how they'd secure the loan, it's not a lucrative position that you'd expect to pay back the amount of the dividend over any reasonable period of time. But in theory someone could convince the hardware-side people that they

don't need to flip any switches just yet because the place is being handled."

"Maybe not a loan, then, a donation drive. And then you'd be all set, right, once the money was there?"

Sonnet blinked at her. "I guess the vice-director who's technically in charge now wouldn't be guaranteed to immediately do something stupid with it, but 'vice-director' is kind of a... courtesy title, the software requires you to put a name there and in this case it would just be the least gratuitously irresponsible guy who had no other servers willing to take him. I wouldn't count on his tenure being more successful than the last guy's."

"Oh. It'd have to be that guy?"

Sonnet opened her mouth, and then let silence hang there for a moment -

"No," she said. "It wouldn't have to be that guy, things just defaulted to him when the last admin bounced. The hardware custodians could turn it over to anyone they thought would act appropriately... and who would live on Specter Sanctuary. Nine days of ten on average, that's the standard."

Anthimeria smiled at her.

They have to live here, the article said. And that was it, wasn't it, anyone could do it but no one wanted to.

Sonnet spent eight hours a weekday talking to people in seconds-long proofs while they shrieked and lunged and sobbed. Sonnet checked her work email on her beach weekend. Sonnet's boss would be the first person who'd notice if she disappeared.

Would it be so intolerable -

"Right," Sonnet said. "I guess my priority might not be getting in touch with Stan about Brook's Crossing after all. Tell him he can guess where I want my next fifty birthday presents and that it'd be nice to have them all at once, would you?"

"Sure, Aunt Sonnet," said Anthimeria.

And Sonnet teleported herself out, back to Deidre Park, back to her office, to bother everyone who'd ever donated a cent, every relative of every once-archived person who didn't bounce messages from the Society, every interest group and every PR-greedy company and every bleeding-heart celebrity.

The endowment stood at yea much; it needed to hit *this* figure; and then Sonnet would be volunteering to administer Specter Sanctuary.

Rat Princess

Dear Brother Vossler,

The journey to School with Beff has been very long. It is only now after these weeks on the road with the wizard escorting us that we have arrived and I have acquired the materials to write you. I do not know how long the mail itself will take to reach home, which is why I address this missive to you instead of to our royal father. Of course if he lives still you should without hesitation share on its contents with him, but it eases my mind to be more sure that the name I have in mind while I write is the same as the one who will read it first.

Beff is an agreeable companion. You will remember I was motivated most chiefly by the desire to travel and see more of the world than our little kingdom, but I am also amenable as most of our kin are not to approaching human beings closely, and closely indeed have I got! I am perpetually aboard her person, in her pocket or riding her shoulder or in her hands. My fur has never been sleeker, as she pets it constantly to preen every hair into place, and she has taken to feeding me directly from her fingertips pieces of whatever she is eating, which is an impressively rich experience by comparison to the grains and vegetables we have historically enjoyed. I do not, unfortunately, know by name what you would be negotiating for with the Tillers to receive similar fare.

I have only the most rudimentary vocal communication with Beff. I can recognize her rendering of my name and vice-versa, and a handful of other words and gestures are understood one way or the other, but the availability of paper is key to my correspondence with her as much as with you! I believe (though in my infacility with the language cannot be certain) that Beff sought paper from the escorting wizard, during our journey, but that he refused her. I have

no guesses why. I saw him writing for his own purposes often enough. With his toad familiar I have no rapport at all. I am not even sure the toad can write. How can they have come to any arrangement, I wonder!

At any rate, we have arrived at the School. Brother, it is so much larger than the House as to be a different kind of thing altogether. The House, the Barn, and the Silo would all three fit many times over into the School. Parts of it are impossible to see, because they are buried in clouds. Yes, clouds! It is shaped like the Silo but so colossal that if you filled it with grain it would multiply our people a hundredfold or more! The rooms inside it are grand also but more of a kind with the rooms of the House. Beff has a room to share with me. I have not seen many other rooms of the School thus far but will write more when I have the opportunity.

Your loving sister, Reeinuchu

Dear Mother and Father,

I am at School now. Princess Reeinuchu is being a very good Familiar to me and it is a comfort to have her with me so far from Home. She is writing a Letter also, please make sure it makes it to the Rats. I do not know yet much about what it will be like doing School. The Wizard did not tell me very much. He is not a Teacher. I am very tired from the long Trip and will sleep now. Another Letter will happen next Week.

Love Beff

Dear Brother Vosser,

I am in some haste to write this to you, and am doing so without the benefit of your own letter. I am in complete transports. There are books here. The Tiller family has three, but I have never inspected one up close; I am sure you remember our reading lessons included nothing of the kind. This School has hundreds. Maybe hundreds of

hundreds! Beff is going to learn magic from some books and does not begrudge me the chance to look at them. At points she has wanted me to turn the pages for her, as some of her introductory exercises involve her hands. So far she cannot produce any magic that I can detect, but she and her instructors seem satisfied with her progress.

I have met three other familiars so far. There is a cat, or at least that's what I think the beast is. This one did not make any attempts on my life, though I didn't invite it to, and stayed quite close to Beff. What a fearsome thing! I am so glad that our people's relationship with the Tillers has kept them out of our territory these many generations. It would leave your whiskers trembling for days. The other two familiars are a crow - also dangerous, but not so intimidating simply to look at - and a rabbit, quite harmless provided we don't need to compete for burrow space, and we do not. None of them speak to me. Hopefully we will have time to learn one another's languages. If I come by any intelligence on the nature of cats and crows and other fearsome things I will be sure to relate it to you.

There are more students roomed near Beff and I, who do not have their own familiars yet, though I do not know whether I should expect that they will acquire them or not. They are overseen by a human with very strict opinions about where everyone should be at all times. Beff has been punished for infractions four times already and my pleading in her defense did not appear to make the slightest impression on her mind. It is a somewhat oppressive environment, but perhaps it is necessary to learn magic.

Your loving sister, Reeinuchu

Dear Mother and Father,

I am doing good enough at the Magic but I am having to be a Grown Up who never plays very quickly now for I am always

studying or confined to my Room. I think I will have to try to teach Princess Reeinuchu to play Checkers. I do not have a Checkers board but I have a lot of paper for writing notes and spell pieces and can write a Checkers board too. It will be Crumpled pieces versus Folded ones I guess. But what if Reeinuchu doesn't like Checkers? Then what can we do if there is no going outside to dig and wander in it? Once I have my first Spell I will be allowed out. There are a lot of Mana Ooze creatures around the School because of all the Magic done here. I have to be able to turn them Inside Out before it is safe to go anywhere without a real wizard so that is the first thing to learn. But I do not know how long it will be before I can turn magic inside out. And there are many parts of the School that have no Oozes at all but that students are not allowed in alone either lest we damage the Books or write Rude Words on the Furniture.

Princess Reeinuchu has again wrote a letter to her brother. I am not reading them because that would be Rude but please give her letter to the Rats. I have not seen any other familiars writing any letters. Maybe Rats have the cunningest hands.

Love, Beff

Dear Brother Vosser,

I have finally received your first letter! What a tremendously slow way for messages to go is this one, though the distance is so great I suppose it is a miracle anything can get from the one place to the other at all.

As you say, the other familiars might possibly be dumb animals. I cannot rule it out, as they are either that or else they are illiterates whose way of speaking is totally beyond me. They are tame for their Wizards, and will run little errands not unlike my page-turning at a command, but might as well have no intellectual lives at all. They are not practicing their letters as they might if they were new to the idea. I do not even see them read. It is disturbing! I am

agreeable enough to be Beff's companion but to have no other society at all does chafe.

Beff's first act of Wizardry is to be a bit of magic that works on magic. Apparently just as when the Tillers thresh a field for the bulk of the grain, they leave bits behind that we are welcome to, Wizards doing their various work will leave bits of magic behind that the students are welcome to, except that the magic can move about on its own and might do us harm if not approached just so. Beff is going to learn how to hunt and claim her own magic as it oozes about, and then she will be free to move about more of the Tower and its surrounds, and she will have enough magic from these gleanings to do more Spellwork. I do not know what the next lesson is after this.

It has indeed occurred to me that I may outlive you and all our siblings, if I am gaining more than merely travel and friendship from my nearness to an incipient wizard. This is the impression I have from hearing the others talk about their familiars, that if they begin very dim at least they will have long lives in which to learn more. If you think it is best I will renounce my claim to the throne that it may continue down your line hence, as I do not think I could readily be both Familiar and Queen. But since it is so important to Beff, I should very much prefer to remain formally a Princess in good standing.

Your loving sister, Reeinuchu

Dear Mother and Father and everybody,

I've learned to catch a mana ooze! I don't know if catch is a good word for the thing, because I do not have it in a jar after, or a basket, or a bucket, and instead it bursts like a bubble. But it leaves a bit of itself behind and that I do have, but not in any thing, just in my Wizardness. It is a peculiar sensation, like when you are not hungry at all and then you have a bite of fresh hot bread with butter

on it and then all at once you are much hungrier though by rights you should be less. I am allowed to go hunting for oozes with all the other students who have this trick now, and there are often quite a lot of them right after the Wizards have done a big bit of Spellwork. They do so many things like bringing rain and taming fire and pulling water up from the ground without having to dig or build anything. Also they can see far away! They can do almost all their magic from right here, where all the mana is, by seeing far away while they do it; and it was very lucky that the Wizard who found me happened to be traveling.

I will learn to do little Hedge Spells next. I am allowed all the books with green binding provided someone is looking over at me to be sure I am good to the books, and they have lots of different ones. I am still deciding which would be the nicest to have. I would ask you what you thought but by the time your letter makes it back to the Tower I will already have learned one or two or maybe three! Maybe I will tell you some I do Not want to learn very early and you can tell me what I should do for my fifth or sixth Spell. There is one for making things different colors. The teachers use it for writing on the walls. There is one to look far away but the version in green binding does not last very long, only a blink. There is one for letting me see things Princess Reeinuchu sees but that seems rude! Sometimes she is writing private letters! I would have to talk to her about it. There is one for blighting weeds but I do not think I will go home very soon to be able to use it on our vegetables. It will have to wait until I am good enough at looking far away. There is one that makes there be two books where there used to be only one book but then neither book is all the way real, and if you tear a page, even a little bit, then the spell is over and you have one book with a torn page somewhere in between the two. The library books are like this. There is one for finding the mana oozes but there are always a lot of them in the dry creekbed whenever I go hunting so far so I do not mean to learn it first. I think it is for wizards going looking for oozes that have got farther away from the tower and must be caught before they meet somebody who is not a wizard.

They're not too fast but they are a little hard to see, and could hurt somebody, if they snuck up.

There are more but my hand is tired. I am getting so much practice reading and writing, but I think I decided: the very first Hedge Spell I will learn is one that will let me write without my hands!

Love, Beff

My King,

Congratulations on your coronation. I regret that I could not be there for our dear father's funeral. I know your reign will be as prosperous and blessed as was his, and will see about asking Beff to send a parcel of some kind of appropriate coronation gift, belatedly though it will arrive.

Beff is enclosing some exotic foods that will travel acceptably. The blue package is for you to disburse as you please and the red for the Tillers.

Now that Beff can cast spells she is dispatched on more chores and errands. I ride in her pocket up and down the height of the Tower, sometimes peering out of windows so high that I can look down at the clouds. Beff tells me she could not climb it, even with her tremendous stride, if it were all by stair, but instead there are magical installations that can lift a passenger into the air with no effort at all. We have seen the libraries, as it turns out there are several. There are great rooms full of mirrors and crystals where Wizards look at faraway places and alter them. Beff carries messages; while there are spells for speaking to others, they interrupt like a shout does, where an apprentice standing by a door need not interrupt, so we spend a lot of time waiting by doors to hand over little notes and take their replies back. There are places it is expected many mana oozes will emerge in the aftermath of a large working, and Beff and the other students bicker over who gets to stand guard over these to get more of the precious scrap mana.

There are things to do in the kitchen, to save on the expense of cooks; a spell can cook through a vat of beans large enough to hold our whole colony in an instant. There is cleaning, which is something of a disappointment, because it is not done with spells at all; it is the task of students who have come off poorly in the ooze hunts and cannot afford the casting of other chores.

Your loving sister, Reeinuchu

Dear Mother and Father and everybody,

I will ask if I can do something about the weather at home. I do not think I am learned enough yet but maybe there are extra chores I could do or something. I have not learned too many new Spells recently, as by this time I am through everything good with the green binding and now I have to learn a language full of Triangles. I will write a bit of it on the back for you to see (it means "Triangle"; only, in the Triangles language, there are different words for different kinds of Triangle, so it is a particular kind). So I certainly do not know a weather Spell myself, as it would be full of Triangles I cannot read well yet. But maybe they could decide where to work on the weather by way of me telling about your letter. It might not happen fast or I should not bother to write about it before its happening.

Princess Reeinuchu says her papa has died and there is a new Rat King who is her brother. She says she is still a Princess forever though. I hope everything is still going all right with the rats.

Love, Beff

My King,

Kindly be patient with the Tillers if they are less generous than their custom! They are ultimately at the mercy of the weather, and Beff is hard at work entreating the greater Wizards to their aid. The postage on more parcels of food would alas begin to be ruinous if it

were used for staples enough to feed the whole clan rather than the occasional treat. Someone has to carry it all that way, and Beff still has not been taught where the main source of magical power is. It cannot all be oozes, because the oozes are the leftovers spilled from great workings. There is more knowledge to come and it is coming painfully slowly but we shall get there in time.

Addendum: Beff has convinced a wizard to let her observe a weather working! It will not be anywhere near our home, and will help the Tiller farm not at all; and she is to remain completely silent throughout, unmoving, watching from what is not even a particularly good spot to see; the hope is that she will learn more about what goes into such a spell, and then know better how to ask gently and respectfully for one to be aimed where she would like it. It has to be in the dead of night for some disagreeable reason, but the opportunity is too rare to decline. This letter must post now but I will let you know more in the next.

Your loving sister, Reeinuchu

Dear everybody,

I have seen a weather working now.

I do not know if I will be able to ask that one be pointed at our farm.

I don't know how to explain. I'll try to write again soon.

Beff

My King,

The wizards are not creating their mana. They are begging it off the beings who write in triangles. The Tower their silo, they are allowing the wizards the least part of their produce, for some favor or threat that I cannot yet fathom. The tendril of blinding white light that

reached into the chamber from its occult direction brought rain, when directed through the lenses and etchings prepared by the wizard. But it departed before the wizard seemed through with it, and there ensued a terrible argument in that same language, aloud and by sign and writing and spell in a great storm of quarrel, and in the end there was less rain than desired. There were so many mana oozes to clean up afterwards that Beff nearly glowed with it, and brought her classmate with the silent rabbit into the chamber to take some of them, and this was only the fraction of the fraction of the power that those entities must wield.

I would not trouble such a thing lightly. And it is not light, I know; but it is at least affecting how affordable postage seems. Please find enclosed more food.

Love, Reeinuchu

Dear NVAVΔ4AMW,

I know it seems like a very small matter from the orthogonal realm, but we do actually use the mana for important things over here. The next time you cut me off in the middle of a working that I already rescheduled into the hours of human inactivity for your convenience, I'm going to start letting the oozes breed so we can do it ourselves, you see if I don't. I cannot overstate how politically popular this would make me with the other humans compared to going through you every time, and if you don't understand why we want the mana, well, I don't understand why you want all the oozes corralled, and I'll go on not understanding it till I've caught up on all the urgent spells. If you want me to abruptly remember why I should give a flying pig about the oozes breeding out of your control you will pay me back what you cheated me out of this most recent occasion *and* we will do the next working during the human active hours. Don't make me involve your superintendent.

Sincerely, Arcanamagister Tholl

Dear Arcanamagister Tholl,

Look, neither of us want that, and you know as well as I do that neither of us want that. You need to be more understanding that I don't live at your beck and call and may sometimes be interrupted or double-booked at moments that aren't when you would most prefer. You could always move your inactive hours to a different time if it's so troublesome to have things scheduled then and you can't stop having inactive hours. But I should be able to do twelve noon next time and spot you the extra this once. Nobody needs to talk to anybody's superintendent.

Best wishes, NVAVΔ4AMW

Noncombatants: The Mocheyn Diaspora

Shuy, for the overwhelming percentage of readers who'll have never heard of it before, is one of a half dozen small hamlets clustered in the Himalayas, in that region where Nepal and India and Bangladesh and Tibet come together. The ethnicity that lives there is called the Mocheyn, and at times their various villages have been possessions of different states, but they see less of the hand of colonialism than most. Historically the lines around them on the map matter almost not at all. Ancient tradition for every group that's ever neighbored theirs is to let them go about their business without interference. During many eras the Mocheyn received food tribute. The Mocheyn have a duty which comes before the worldly things like taxes and foreign wars: they have to placate their gods while everyone else gets out of the way.

The specific Mocheyn village I was visiting has a distinct claim to fame besides just being one of the settlements occupied by this ethnic group, though. Some quirk of their upbringing, native tongue, or possibly even genetics makes Mocheyn people gifted translators. It's not just an isolated savant who can pick up Finnish in a few weeks - they churn them out on a routine, if slow, basis, and the chosen few wind up exported all over the globe, interpreting between the most obscure languages in the world more easily than the average high school Spanish teacher can order a burrito. Shuy is the village where would-be translators gather to fly the nest. I was invited along on a trip to collect a batch of two, by a local correspondent whose agency places a couple of Mocheyn every year.

My correspondent, though, fell ill before the trip, so I proceeded alone, or as alone as one can be when accompanied by porters and guides to help me up the difficult terrain. I had to communicate

with them through guidebook phrases and gestures, but I didn't hire an interpreter: once in Shuy I wouldn't need one. Most likely the people I was going to pick up there spoke English already, and if they didn't, they'd pick it right up, or so I was given to understand.

Shuy looks at first glance a lot like your stereotypical developing-world village in abject poverty. People, demographically skewed very young, cram in ten per cramped stone cottage. They wear T-shirts from alternate timelines in which the other guy won the Super Bowl, over those same shirts but altered into skirt-like garments, the sleeves turned in and sewn shut for pockets. They free-range their children beyond anything you see in the West. I spent my stay talking to a particular set of kindergarten-age triplets every day and never did figure out who they belonged to.

The translators that they dispatch wire remittances home. It's within the Mocheyn's power to make large durable purchases sometimes, and they do: they have modern, if not Western, plumbing, shared between everyone and parked right in the middle of the village. I saw first aid kits that could have come out of a Walgreen's and the midwife was nearly as well equipped as the more globalized clinics downhill. The village owns a pickup truck with a snowplow attachment. They even have a generator with associated outlets, to run various essential devices, and by its light I drafted this article. What I didn't encounter was evidence of luxury spending. The people and the buildings were undecorated and severe. There was enough food, but I didn't need to brace myself for a culinary adventure: they had meat and grain and beans and milk and presented all these things in the most obvious and least labor-intensive ways possible. Typically boiled.

They need to save on labor because their child to adult ratio is so immense. A typical Mocheyn woman gives birth around fifteen times and has multiples as often as not. The kids can and do occupy themselves once they're ambulatory, but that doesn't close the gap if you've got enough babies to exceed legal staffing ratios in an

American daycare. And the mothers are operating alone, much of the time: the men are at war.

If you haven't heard of the Mocheyn's war, you're not alone. It gets far less attention than the typical warlordism in Africa or dustup in the Middle East. Even for the people who live near them, it's background noise; by ancient tradition, the Mocheyn fight one another and die to appease the gods on a specific battlefield and do not involve outsiders. I didn't arrive intending to view or remark on the war. I was there to collect some conscientious objectors.

Pekhee and Zou-zuen were presented to me as a married couple, with Pekhee, the wife, being a touch older than her husband - they're fifteen and fourteen. That's an unusual age of marriage even in Shuy. Actually, marriage itself is unusual in Shuy. They have the concept, but usually the children come from some combination of the women visiting the war bands and the war bands coming home on leave, with no real effort to avoid mixing up who's spending their vacation with whom or track which children belong to which father. Not so with these two, though. They both intended to leave Shuy and all the other Mocheyn behind and start new lives together, translating. "He has no stomach for war," Pekhee told me, describing Zou-zuen. "And I have none for death." They'd met an English speaker before. They had Indian accents at first, but were copying my mid-Atlantic by the time I'd spent one night there.

Zou-zuen was born in Shuy, but Pekhee came from another Mocheyn village much like it, a four-day hike under ideal conditions. Shuy is the most accessible, and therefore the one that the translator's agency collects from. Most kids don't get the option. The remittances, while helpful, are not as central to their way of life as the endless battle and the endless production of soldiers to die in it. While Mocheyn women are frequently occupied in raising children, nothing stops them from becoming warriors. Any who want to and some who don't join the warbands. There is no tendency to send them home if they wind up pregnant during their campaigns,

although if they manage to survive to give birth, the babies are remanded to their sisters back in the villages at the first opportunity. Pekhee explained to me that she was curious about the outside world, and that she wanted to see all her children turn thirty. These desires aren't stigmatized, per se, among her people: it's just understood that not everyone can indulge such whims when duty calls them to battle.

It dismayed Zou-zuen at first, when he saw that I'd appeared without the translator agency representative. He'd met the fellow before, a year previously, and seen his cousin and her hastily-assigned husband depart. (I was unable to find where exactly they'd been placed, which might mean they've landed sensitive diplomatic or intelligence positions.) In introducing myself, I assured him that I was capable of (with my porters and guides) showing him and his wife the way to the agency, where they'd be connected with jobs as they expected. Zou-zuen could tell that I wasn't an Indian like the person he'd been expecting, and wanted to know if I was American or European or Chinese. (Visitors to the Mocheyn are rare, and media penetration almost nonexistent, so it's entirely possible that pale-skinned Chinese officials have there been mistaken for "white" in the past to some embarrassment.) He calmed right down when I confirmed that I was an American. "Americans count," he said.

And then he asked me to cut off one of his fingers.

Lost in the shuffle of logistical preparation, I had not been informed of this observance. Zou-zuen and Pekhee explained: their duty, from birth as part of the Mocheyn, was to the war. Natural deformity - not uncommon, with a limited diet and all these twins and triplets squeezing each other in the womb - marked a person as being of particular interest to the gods, even if their presence in combat amounted to human sacrifice more than anything else. No one with a club foot or cleft lip could be allowed to leave. Mocheyn maiming one another outside of ritual warfare would offend the gods

likewise. But, Zou-zuen explained, if I, an outsider representing a great distant culture, were to cut off one finger from each of the couple, they'd be marked as interesting to foreign powers, and the gods would consent to let them depart.

This practice emerged, I was told, less than thirty years ago. A tourist with more hiking ability than sense all but stumbled into Shuy, where he became infatuated with a local girl. The Mocheyn taboo on intermixing with outsider blood is intense. His advances, however romantically intended, quite literally threatened her life. The likeliest outcome if she were to fall under any suspicion for sex with the stranger would have been an amateur, fatal hysterectomy before any mixed child could implant, performed on the battlefield so that her blood would appease rather than rile up the gods. Accordingly, a couple of the girl's brothers had gotten into a lethal fight with the visitor. The visitor died. Followup investigations by various jurisdictions that technically consider Mocheyn territory to be within their remit found the brothers blameless. But one of the brothers, Eosht, lost an eye in the fight.

After some kind of consultation with the gods, they determined that Eosht was allowed to leave. It was unprecedented. Mocheyn legend says that whenever their people have attempted escape, or been forcibly removed, from a certain distance from the ancestral battleground, ruin has befallen the escapee and whoever accompanied them. Policies that at least don't contradict that belief seem to be in place for everyone who has ever taken a turn administering this patch of the Himalayas, insofar as fact-checking could discern. But this man, one-eyed through the attack of a foreigner from a national power sufficient to give the gods themselves pause, could go.

Eosht went, found work as an interpreter, and - chafing at the celibacy needed to avoid fathering any half-Mocheyn children - came back along with a colleague, to check if he could bring a wife out with him. The colleague was somehow convinced to chop off a girl's

little finger, she survived the process, and she left Shuy with her new husband. When Eosht's bride too demonstrated improbable linguistic talents, entrepreneurial spirits began siphoning off one or two couples every year or so from the villages. This was the program Pekhee and Zou-zuen were expecting, eagerly, to join; better, in their eyes, to sacrifice a finger to America than their entire lives to the Mocheyn gods. The usual agency man wasn't there, but I was, and I was American as you please.

I did not agree immediately to bring down a cleaver on these teenagers' hands. I planned to stay a full week, and needed a little while to get used to the idea.

The first departing Mocheyn couple have lived in India for twenty-eight years as of this writing, mostly in Uttar Pradesh with stints in New Delhi. Sources disagree on whether Eosht and his wife (who has adopted the Indian name Jaya) have seventeen or twenty-two children. Those children have been aggressively matchmade with the equally full-blooded Mocheyn diaspora, those of their counterparts who work in the Amazon basin, or the Caucasus mountains, or the Native American reservations in the United States, learning and translating and preserving every dwindling human language. Several restive adolescents have been deemed flight risks from their ancestral duties and delivered back into the laps of their cousins up in the mountains: better for them to never see another movie, never eat another chocolate bar, never live to see age thirty thanks to their participation in the endless blood sacrifice, than for a Mocheyn child born and raised in Arizona to marry out. There are no records of such Mocheyn-Americans (or Mocheyn-Irish, or Mocheyn-Brazilians) walking back down the mountain from Shuy once they arrive. But provided the whole family understands their ultimate responsibilities lie with the gods wherever they make their homes, they approve of having Mocheyn scattered across every country that will have them: this way, if something wipes out all the villages, an emergency repatriation effort can repopulate them and appease the divine.

The children, too, even though they're born outside the traditional Mocheyn stomping grounds, must be promptly physically identified as being of interest to a great power. Most of the translator families pursue this by circumcising their boys. It's commonly enough available in the United States, and their deal with their agency includes trips and services to get the snips snipped as a necessary expense. But when they bear their children under unsupportive circumstances - a war zone, or an airline complication, or a bank issue, preventing them from getting plane tickets - they settle for having the nearest white or Chinese person chop off a baby finger. America considers it a religious freedom issue, ever since an attempt to remove a baby girl from a second-generation Mocheyn family in Texas resulted in the parents murder-suiciding the girl, her three older brothers, and then themselves, rather than surrender her to someone who wouldn't chop her finger off and raise her in the faith. There are rumors that fact-checking couldn't substantiate, but which suggest a possible shape of the behind-the-scenes conflict, that the agency pulled some Mocheyn who were working on CIA projects until they could be guaranteed their religious rights as a matter of American law. They're good cryptanalysts as well as translators.

Pekhee and Zou-zuen were quite cheerful about the prospect of being down a pinky each. (Pekhee, left-handed, wanted the right one off; Zou-zuen planned to lose the left.) There were antibiotics on hand, and the midwife saw finger amputations every year and would be able to stitch them up. It would hurt a lot less than giving birth a dozen times without an epidural (a convenience they do not have available in Shuy, but have no religious objections to) or getting disemboweled to feed the gods their fill of blood (a fate Zou-zuen, at least, could avoid only by leaving his finger behind). Only I could do it; my porters and guides were Sherpas, and while it wasn't guaranteed that they *wouldn't* count as belonging to an adequately great power to subdue the wrath of the gods, if they didn't, another maiming would be called for. So why ask one of them instead of the convenient American?

Plagued with fears about bringing the knife down onto the metacarpal instead of the finger alone, I asked if there was anything else I could do. I wasn't competent to perform a circumcision, and Zou-zuen didn't look thrilled at the prospect of me trying, but eventually Pekhee said I could try piercing her ear, and they would ask the gods about that. If, and only if, I promised to chop off her finger should an ear piercing not suffice.

The Mocheyn don't practice any form of body modification amongst themselves; they either have no desire to decorate their bodies with scars and inks and jewelry, or it would offend the gods if they did it to one another without hauling in a subject of a great foreign power to wield the implements. Should they have thought of tattoos and piercings earlier? The ones who've grown up in the States surely could have. But - notwithstanding the wayward teens, deported to the villages to protect the ethnic gene pool from contamination and usually chewed up right away by the war - most Mocheyn who've left feel a considerable aversion to returning home again. They integrate, accent and all, into whatever part of the world their agency emplaces them. They don't send letters. Shuy doesn't have a phone line. And the gods won't be able to tell them "not good enough, try again" from too great a distance; ethnic Mocheyns claim that they are more sensitive to this sort of thing than outsiders, who it is said can only feel the gods when they're agitated or during a visit to the battlefield itself, but even a Mocheyn can't get a clear omen from more than twenty miles away. Apparently me and my rhinestone studs were going to be the first to find out if there's a way to spare all those babies the loss of their fingers.

I'd never pierced anyone's ears before, but they had disinfectant, and I had earrings, and it requires both less force and less precision than severing a digit. I put one of my earrings through Pekhee's ear, and left it there, since all the Mocheyn agree that it probably won't work at all if the piercing is allowed to heal closed and she'll definitely have to keep the stud till she can get one of her own. And then I got to witness the villagers calling for the verdict of the gods.

"I think we should just cut the paragraphs after this," said Joel, tapping the marked-up draft. "If we can't get ahold of Lisa -"

"Yeah, we can't, she's still in the hospital and nobody from work is on the visitors' list," replied Bill. "I called her mom and her mom cussed me out."

"If we can't get her to edit it into something less sensational we can still print most of what she wrote before the breakdown, but not what's after it. No amount of fact-checker insertions will salvage it."

"It ends too abruptly."

"Well, then I don't think we can run it at all till she's back at work," Joel said. "It's a great piece, we'll sell a million issues, but the last section isn't worth it. You can't publish a nonfiction article about Lisa having a nightmare."

"Religious experience," said Bill.

"If that's what you want to call it! Does ' *The choking, crawling certainty that malevolent entities had fixed their attention on Shuy and those of us ants who stood there.* ' sound like a religious experience? It's not even a complete sentence." Joel dripped with contempt for sentence fragments. "Or ' *The battle! The endless bloody battle, fought not by enemies but ally against ally, all to hold the breach against their wrath!* ' Religious experiences are about oneness with the universe and Jesus telling you to build a cathedral and shit."

"Lisa's a good writer, she's just going through it right now. It sounded bad enough I'm impressed she managed to write *anything* ," said Bill.

"Right, so, if she hadn't, the piece would end here, and we'd print it with a little note mentioning that tragically, Lisa passed out around

this point but we're hoping she makes a full recovery. That's cool and spooky and it wouldn't be bad journalism, if she'd passed out. Instead she wrote this little horror poem thing, so if you don't want to cut the piece and she's not out of the hospital in time for the June issue's deadline, I think we have to kill it. We can't shoehorn it into July, that's the Japan issue."

"You're right," sighed Bill. "When you're right, you're right."

Hollow Grove

I ran as fast as I could but I never managed to step on a varmint.

I wasn't trying - that is, I was trying to run fast, but I was pretty much pretending about wanting to stomp one of the palm-sized fuzzy guys that scampered and glided around the field while I was training. It would be unpleasant in so many ways. I'd probably trip and it'd get grossly squashed and all the other girls on the track team thought varmints were cute so they'd be upset. Some girls would tuck foreclaws into their jerseys and wear them around like good luck charms for going over hurdles or aiming at a personal best on the hundred meters. I didn't care for the critters myself. Probably picked it up from my dad, who'd sweep them out the dog door with a pushbroom and swear at them when he thought I wasn't listening. But I didn't want them dead, especially not messily under my foot.

There weren't burrows on the track itself. Somebody'd turn an ankle. If any were ever dug they got patched up before the kids saw them. The varmints boiled up out of holes out among the trees and shrubbery instead, whenever there was activity to watch. Most of the holes hugged the trunks so you'd have to be trying to put your toes down one while you were picking fruit.

When Coach told me to take a break that was what I went and did, slow to a jog and then a walk and drift to the blueberries. Eye-level was as always a bit sparse, but I wanted to lie down anyway, so I rolled under a bush, looked up at the leaves, and ate directly from the branch.

"Kelly?"

I rolled out, still chewing. It was one of the school admins. "Yeah-huh?"

"Can I get your help with a bit of a special assignment?"

I sat up. "What kinda special assignment?"

"We have a *transfer student* . From Tintown."

My jaw didn't drop open, but only because I hadn't swallowed all my blueberries. I knew the *words* "transfer student", but it wasn't the kind of thing that happened in Hollow Grove. Sometimes somebody new would move in, usually a family that had heard it was a great place to raise kids; sometimes people would move out, mostly young folks who'd just left high school. But nobody just started attending Hollow Grove High when they hadn't been through Hollow Grove Elementary. And nobody had moved in! There hadn't been a housewarming party. I didn't go to every housewarming party, but I *heard* about them all.

The admin kept talking: "Her name is Amy and she's sixteen. She's staying with a cousin of hers who lives here. She's worried she's going to have a hard time adjusting to Hollow Grove after growing up in Tintown and I think it'd help her a lot to have somebody go take the initiative in getting to know her. And I hear she's interested in taking up running."

"I can do that," I said, pushing myself up to my feet. "Who's her cousin?"

"Ron Sanders, over in Plum Orchard. Oh, and Kelly - outside Hollow Grove, they don't do the Santa thing. Amy does know that *you* aren't supposed to know yet, but I picked you not just because you're friendly and run track, but also because you're *almost* old enough to find out about Santa and if she does slip up following the custom there, you'll only be a few months early."

Obviously I knew Santa was not real. Everyone found out Santa was not real by the time they were like, ten, tops. But there was some other thing that we weren't supposed to find out till later than that, and we just said "finding out about Santa" to refer to it, because it was a complicated secret and explaining what it was even about would be too much of a clue. Some secret that was sort of like Santa in some way that I would presumably understand once I was older. It at least seemed to share the "it's more fun to believe the kid version" characteristic. My older sister Rachel got really upset when she turned eighteen, and for a while was seriously thinking about moving to Tintown herself. Kids at school would swap made-up guesses. Like, "Santa is that all bread is made of bugs", or "Santa is that in olden times dogs lived forever". Neither sounded right to me but I didn't have my own guess.

I didn't bother the adults around me about it because sometimes it kind of looked like they might tell me if I asked.

"So you're not getting a grownup to make friends with her because *she's* not a grownup, but she might Santa me so I should be ready for that?" I said, to make sure I'd gotten the picture.

"That's right. Can I count on you, Kelly?"

I bobbed my head. I didn't super want to be Santa'd early but it sounded like this Amy girl needed somebody and I'd been asked first. "Like now, or after practice?"

"Now; I just got back from talking to her cousin Ron and it's a good time."

So I told Coach, and instead of going around the track again, I lit off at a jog toward Plum Orchard, two radials off from Due North St. starting from the town center (which was where the schools were). I could take the distance in ten minutes, if I went as fast as I could - and I was missing practice to do it, so I pushed, eating up the ground between me and the plum trees.

Everywhere has plum trees - everywhere has all kinds of fruit - but the ones in Plum Orchard are all the same kind, so they all bloom at once and all fruit at once, instead of being the staggered types you'll find one or two of among the apples and pears and peaches in every parklet and along every street. It made the neighborhood especially pretty in springtime. Varmints chased me, gliding between roofs and branches and skittering at my feet. They were faster than me over short stretches but I could keep going longer than any of them; I shook off tired ones as they dove down convenient burrow-tunnels and picked up curious new ones following me in the air and pacing me on the street.

I slowed down, feeling my heart hammer in my ribcage, when I found the orchard and the houses throughout it. Hollow Grove was a small town, but I didn't immediately know which house belonged to Ron Sanders. I started reading mailboxes, warming down with a slow meander through the trees. The plums weren't in fruit right now, but there were plenty of other things to snack on in the understory; I uprooted a few peanuts and started picking them open with my nails while I searched.

The twelfth mailbox I read said RON SANDERS and then underneath, in still-shiny-new paint, AMY TORRES. I dropped my last couple peanuts in a place that looked like it could use a peanut plant and trotted up to the door and rapped on it smartly.

"Just a minute!" called Ron from inside. I bounced on my toes, stretched out my calves a little, and was presently admitted to the house. "It's Kelly, right?" he asked.

"Yeah, I live in Vineyard over the river. Is Amy home?"

"She is! Amy, visitor for you!"

"I don't know anybody!" said a thin voice from up the stairs.

"I'm here to fix that!" I called back. "Hi! I'm Kelly Baker, welcome to Hollow Grove!"

There was a silence, and then down came Amy. She clung to the banister like she'd never been on a flight of stairs before. She was spindly and wan; if I hadn't known for a fact that anybody moving into Hollow Grove needed to stop at the doctor's before they saw anybody else, I'd have sprinted off to get her a medic. She had her black hair cut astonishingly short, except for whimsical two-inch tufts protruding in front of her ears and two more acting as imitation pigtails, and she was wearing obviously temporary clothes, featureless hospital modesty garments that made her look even skinnier than she was.

I didn't want her first impression of me to be that I was rude, though, so I just beamed at her rather than saying something stupid about how she needed to eat an entire loaf of bread. "I wasn't sure what I should show you first on the Hollow Grove grand tour but I can guess now it's gonna be the clothes store. The hospital stuff is just awful, isn't it? You'd think they could at least tie dye it or something!"

Amy looked down at herself. "I don't think tie dye would help... How far is the clothes store?" Her Tintown accent was pretty pronounced but I could understand her.

"Only about a mile and a half. I heard you want to take up running, right? But if you're new that might be a lot to do in one go so we can walk most of it."

She didn't have room to get paler, but her eyes went wider. "That's so far. I don't know if I can even walk the whole way."

"We're borrowing the Smiths' dogcart while Amy builds up her strength," Ron volunteered.

"Wow, okay. How about I jog and you cart, then, and once we've got you some clothes you can walk around in the city center till you need a rest and then you can cart back?" I said.

She nodded, if hesitantly. Ron helped us wrangle the cart and hitch up the Smiths' big dog, Bert. Plum Orchard itself had a lot of tree roots to contend with, but once we got it onto the path proper it wasn't too hard for me to pace Bert and tell Amy which way to steer.

"So what interests you about running?" I asked. Though I was a firm believer that anyone could get into any hobby if they were sincerely aiming to, it didn't look like she could possibly have much history with this one. Why would a track kid have been sent her way instead of a music kid, or an embroidery kid?

"Uh. Before I went to the Hollow Grove doctor I couldn't even *walk*," said Amy. "Or, like, I could take a few steps, but it hurt a lot and made my legs even worse than they were anyway if I did it too much. So mostly it interests me that - I'll be able to, once I'm in better condition."

"Wow!" Not everybody in Hollow Grove was great at getting around. The Smiths had an extremely old grandma who was the usual dogcart user. But not being able to walk more than a few steps at a time was awful. "Most people in Tintown *can* walk, right - their track team comes to meets with ours most years and everything."

"Oh, yeah, most people. But there's stuff our doctors -" She shook herself, then corrected the cart's course. "Their doctors. Can't handle. So I wanted to come here and get fixed up, and there's not really a way to... do that and then go back after. Not a good way."

I didn't think any of my questions were polite - why wait till she was sixteen? Why just her and not her parents and siblings too? What had wrecked her legs to begin with? And before I could try to think

of some oblique remark that might bring the topic around, a varmint jumped up on Bert's back, and Amy screamed.

"What?" I exclaimed. "What's wrong - it's just a varmint -"

She was taking very deliberate deep breaths, clutching her cart seat with both hands so hard I imagined her fingers would break, calming herself down. "Right. Just a *varmint*," she agreed faintly.

"Tintown's the wrong climate for them or something?" I asked, reaching for the varmint. I was indifferent between scaring it off the dog and grabbing it to fling it away myself; it picked the former option. "Weren't there any in your cousin's house?"

"No! Oh god, will there be usually?"

"Sure, they get in through the dog doors."

"Cousin Ron doesn't have a dog!"

"The house still has doors for them, and the varmints can use those. My dad doesn't really like 'em either. I'd usually say I don't care for 'em myself but that scream was something, wow!" I laughed. "Are you okay? They usually won't land right on a person unless somebody's been trying to get them to, you don't have to worry they're gonna crawl on you or anything."

"People *do* that?"

"Sometimes, sure, they're soft and some people reckon they're cute." The trip took a lot longer at a dogcart pace. Bert could probably have picked it up, but Amy looked like she'd rattle right out of the cart if he took a tuft of grass at speed. "They don't bite or anything."

"I guess," said Amy vaguely, now scanning the ground and the trees for the flashing grey-brown shapes. "There are a *lot* of them."

"I know, right? Probably more underground, that's where they live."

"I knew there were some here but not that they'd be - in the houses, getting super close like that -"

"Maybe you can get your cousin to prop something up against the dog door?" I asked dubiously. "I think it's a tripping hazard or something or my dad would do it but maybe it'd be fine for a week while you're getting settled in."

"I guess I'll, uh, ask him about it." She shivered again. "You don't like them? Nobody's like, oh, Kelly, give them a chance, here, pet this one, they're our friends?"

"No, what?" I laughed. "You don't have to like varmints to fit right in in Hollow Grove, promise. Sometimes I pretend like if I can run fast enough I'll step on one. Like, I wouldn't really, ick, but as an example."

"Maybe one day I will be able to run fast enough to step on one," said Amy solemnly.

"That's the spirit!"

Once we were out of the residential area and on the main drag toward the center of town Bert sped up, Amy proved able to keep her seat, and I ran slightly ahead to show the way to the clothes store. They caught up and I unhitched the dog to let him go play in the nearest park till we needed him for the trip back. Amy followed me, a bit wobbly, through the doors.

"This is a store?" she asked, looking blankly around.

"...yeah?" I said. "Uh, why, what would a store look like in Tintown?"

"More, uh - wait a second, *you're* not wearing all beige, where do you get *your* clothes?"

"I get them here!" I pulled my shirt taut; I had it dipdyed green. "One they've got you measured and you've picked a style you like they'll whip it up for you, they should be able to do some of the quick stuff while we go get a salad or something, and then you dye it or take it to somebody who embroiders or whatever you want. I think you probably want like a wrap dress or something? In case your size changes and you want to be able to adjust the belt."

"My size -" She looked at her wrist-bones "I actually haven't heard very good things about Hollow Grove food, do you really expect I'm going to fatten up on salads?"

"I have no idea! But a wrap dress will work either way," I said. "If you aren't used to moving around too much you might wind up hungrier than you're expecting. What's Tintown food like?"

"I mean, sometimes it sucks or there's not enough of it, for sure. If it was so great back home I'd still be there," she shrugged, awkwardly hefting a linen sample. "I like all the fruit growing all over the place fine. But there's stuff that you're not - that you don't have here, or don't have much of. And fruit and salad aren't really high calorie!"

"They're not, they're just for nibbling on through the day. We have bread and meat and stuff, this just happens to be right across the street from the salad place - we could go get omelettes but you'd have to walk farther -"

"Salads are fine. Uh, this seems nice? I like red..."

One of the tailors appeared at her elbow to take her measurements and get her opinion on a range of reds and possible wrap dress styles. Then he vanished again to get her a dress made.

"I was sort of expecting there to be fewer choices," she said, as we walked across the way to get salad.

"Of clothes or of vegetables?" I asked, scanning the menu.

"...both, I guess. There's things we don't have in Tintown but not things that... we can't... ugh, never mind. Do you have a recommendation?"

The salad place was the kind where you just poke a picture of the salad you want and it pops out on a conveyor belt, so there was nobody but me she could be asking. I poked my order, a bowlful of finely shaved ribbons of jicama and cucumber and mango. "I always get the same thing here. If you're not feeling adventurous the melon one is pretty uncomplicated."

She wound up picking carrot sesame, and our bowls rolled out and we took a booth by the window to watch life go by. People were walking their dogs, carrying their toddlers on their shoulders, holding hands with their spouses, pausing between point A and point B to collect apples or pick flowers. Or so I assumed, because that was what I'd normally expect to see, but I was mostly watching Amy. She was making a lot of complicated faces. I was pretty sure she liked the salad. I mostly couldn't decipher the rest of it. She didn't like... something, or at least had really mixed feelings about... dogs? Couples? Babies? Every possibility seemed so unlikely and furthermore also unlikely to be good snack conversation.

"This is good," she said eventually, so at least part of my read was confirmed.

"Mm-hm! Does Plum Orchard do cookouts every night, do you know? I live in Vineyard and we do but I know in some neighborhoods people like making more personalized stuff in their kitchens most of the time."

"I have no idea," said Amy.

"Well, you can come to my place after we get you into your dress and order you a few more outfits, if you want, and in a few hours we'll have a cookout - big grill, lots of stuff on it, fish and pineapple and steaks and chicken and asparagus and everything. Way more filling than a salad. Or, well, it is if you go for the meat, it's not if you eat asparagus all evening."

"That does sound nice," she said. She spoke softly, like she was admitting something embarrassing. "How do I let Cousin Ron know where I'll be since you don't have, uh -" She made a hand motion, then stopped herself, then stopped stopping herself. If Santa was actually a particular way of holding one's hands that was going to be a big anticlimax.

"I think he can probably guess? Like, someone came to your house, and you went off, and then you aren't back right away, you're still with me, right? But even if you did wanna go wander off by yourself why would that be a big deal?"

Amy giggled, tentatively, as though crying instead was still on the table. "I guess it wouldn't. I couldn't exactly get very far. Could I."

"Don't get me wrong, if you see a toddler wandering around alone you should tell somebody, they could fall in the water or wander into a blackberry thicket and get stuck! But you're not a toddler."

"Right. Okay. The cookout sounds - nice. Yeah."

When we were done with our salad we went back across the street to collect her dress. There was a screen for her to change behind, and she picked out a few more to have finished sometime the next day. She wanted to know how many outfits was normal to have, and I said it depended on how often you liked to pick out new clothes. If you only wanted to go shopping every couple of years you might want more than a dozen so they each took longer to wear out. I had fewer, just my school outfit - suitable for running and comfortable to wear all day long - plus a party dress and a set of

pajamas, and I updated all my looks every few months when my stuff started to get holes or stains. Then I wound up explaining laundry. Apparently they did it differently in Tintown, and the details, somehow, involved Santa, rather than a Hollow Grove style automatic system that'd return the clothes to you by pneumatic tube after they went down the laundry chute.

By the time we got to my neighborhood the sun was starting to drop behind the western arc of mountain peaks. The firepit glowed in the twilight, and I could smell char in the air from the bird my neighbor was grilling, and there was a smooth hubbub of voices carrying along the aisles created by the grape trellises that lined our neighborhood's center.

"Mom!" I called, when I spotted her. "This is Amy, she's a transfer student!"

The words "transfer student" were still interesting to adults but not as startling as they'd been to me, apparently. Heads turned and everyone smiled and waved at us but Amy did not become the instant center of attention.

So we were free to go between the vines, picking grapes and introducing her to people a few at a time - my parents, and the Jacksons, and the Fengs and the other Fengs who were the grown-up son of the first ones plus his family, and we stopped by the grill to get Amy a chicken thigh - "How is it?" I asked. She'd found the salad so odd, and looked so underfed, I wanted her to like it.

"It's good," she said, with a surprised earnestness I didn't know how to contextualize. She ate the whole thing while it was still piping hot. I took a little longer with my wing, I'd been grazing on growing things all day and I supposed that must be harder if you had limited walking endurance. We meandered through the grape maze, green and red and purple varieties all twining together where their trellises

touched, and I showed her everyone's houses, and we swung back by the grill for pineapple.

The varmints didn't like the smoke, but they were numerous enough even just five paces back from the grill, clinging to vines and gliding over our heads. Every time one moved, Amy looked at it. She wasn't getting used to them very quickly. But she refocused on her food and chewed through some of everything, albeit slowing down by the time my dad flipped a serving of rainbow trout onto her plate.

Everybody seemed to be trying not to overwhelm her, with the aggregate result that nobody was acting interested in her at all except me. So it wasn't hard to pull her away from the cookout when we were through with eating. The dog cart would be pretty hard to navigate with in the dark, even if I could run along a well-maintained path under starlight just fine.

Amy sat in her cart, watching my feet and Bert's paws. "It's nice here," she said, out of nowhere, when I'd escorted her halfway back to her cousin's house.

"I'm really glad you like it!" I said. "You seem kind of homesick off and on but I think you'll settle in perfectly, and you'll get healthier and you'll be able to do whatever you want."

Something about *that* seemed to hit her sourly. She turned her face away from me before I could do much analysis. "Sure."

"You know," I remarked, after a silence, "you can just say when you're trying not to Santa me, instead of making things up."

"I think that'd make it pretty obvious."

"You're already kinda obvious," I said. "I can tell when you're thinking about Santa."

"All right. I will settle in, and I'll get healthier, and then I will be able to do whatever I want, except *become Santa* . Happy?"

I was, if only because that sounded ridiculous enough to make me laugh. We rolled up to Ron's house. I put the dog cart away and got Bert situated where he belonged overnight, and Amy let herself in.

"See you tomorrow?"

"Uh, sure?"

"Will I see you at school or are you not starting yet?"

"Not yet," she said. "I'd screw up and tell everybody the true meaning of Christmas. Besides, I'm a little ahead on some stuff, mostly I need to catch up on things like being able to walk."

"That makes sense. I can skip part of track to come hang out," I said. "You haven't seen the half of Hollow Grove yet. I'll show you all the cool places in town."

The next day I had school, of course. Everyone needed to learn to read and add, and it was also a lot more rewarding to play music or paint pictures if you knew what you were doing, so there were classes in those. School was also the natural point to form sports teams like my track group or the swimmers or whatever. I was also taking a course on dog training. I didn't have my own dog, but the family dog had died not too long before and I was thinking about getting a puppy. Some things didn't meet all year round, and I'd finished my short course on how to build a campfire and the one on keeping honeybees. I hadn't completely gotten over my nervousness about bees, but it had helped a lot. I didn't feel called to a serious career, so I wasn't taking the complicated classes for future doctors or future Enrichment Committee members or future teachers.

After going through all my bread and butter and cheese for lunch, I ran through the track warmups, took two laps around the field, and then told Coach I was going to pick up Amy and show her around some more. I took off running.

I loved the feeling of grass beneath my feet. Some kids were music types who lived for drumbeats, some were all about making watercolors do crazy things, but I was a track girl through and through even if my track was the route to Plum Orchard. I jogged to a halt feeling like I could run a four-minute mile. How quickly, I wondered, would Amy be better at walking? Was she going to the doctor every day to get pills or something to make her stronger? Did her cousin Ron remind her to practice walking around when she was at home?

She'd get lots of practice with me. I collected her and the dog cart same as before and we went into town. She picked up her new clothes, finished since we'd been there the day before, and petted the mesh bag absently with one hand while I walked her to the dance hall, and the amphitheater, and the dog park. We left Bert at the dog park, chasing varmints like nobody'd ever taught him not to, but at least there was no risk he'd catch one. I'd planned a route that would let her sit down and take a break between short bursts of walking for the rest of the tour. Near the dog park was the omelette restaurant, but she'd had lunch - apparently Ron made stew most days - and the grocery store.

Amy wanted to see everything in the grocery store. She had this weird furrowed-brow look on her face the whole time. I didn't know what she was expecting. There was meat and fish, which she knew existed because we'd had the cookout. There were vegetables, the kind that didn't just grow everywhere conveniently; that couldn't be a surprise because her cousin had made stew. There was flour, for bread, and butter, to put on it, along with cheese and cream and milk and yogurt and eggs. The kinds of nuts that were better roasted, the kinds of fruits that were out of season and offered dried

or frozen and the kinds of veggies that made good pickles in their jars. Spices and salt. Lentils and beans. Vanilla and cocoa. What was Amy looking for that she couldn't find?

She stopped at the vanilla, bags of long wrinkly beans right next to the cardamom pods. "This," she said, pointing it out. "What do you do with it?"

"Me personally or like in general?"

"Both, what is it - for, in Hollow Grove."

"I like it in raspberry compote - you cook the raspberries down and strain out the seeds and put in the inside goop from the vanilla bean and then you put it in yogurt. My mom likes it in hot milk with honey -"

"Honey! Okay, where's the honey?" said Amy, lighting up.

"- it's not *here*," I laughed. "Same way there aren't, oh, fresh blueberries. You don't go to the *store* to find it if you want it!"

"From... bees?" said Amy, grimacing. "You have to do it yourself, the store won't do it for you?"

"Honey keeps really well and it comes out of the hive pretty much ready to eat. It isn't like there's a ton of steps you can't do at home, you can put a hive wherever's convenient and save the honey no problem. The grocery store is for, like, if you grew a ton of wheat, it'd take up more space than a whole neighborhood, and it has to be cut and dried and milled, and the store means you don't have to do *that*. But if you could just pick a loaf of bread off a tree the store wouldn't have flour at all!"

"What if you don't know how to make bread?" Amy asked.

"It's... not really hard? You could learn in like a day."

"What if you hate making bread, then."

"Then you get some from a friend and you make them smoothies or you weed their carrots something, I guess? That's not more of a hassle than making extra trips to the store."

She looked up and down the aisle, again, searching for - something. Did Santa Claus distribute bread in Tintown? Every guess I came up with was stupider than the last.

She either found what she was looking for, or didn't, and closed her eyes and sighed. "Okay. So there's honey but you have to get it from the bees or from friends who have bees."

"I have bees, if you want a jar of honey! I took a class on beekeeping."

"...yeah. Uh, I might want kind of a lot of honey."

"Well, I don't have a lot of hives, but I can get you a pretty decent sized jar," I assured her. "Do you really just get it at the store in Tintown? That's so funny, is that how you get fruit too?"

She hesitated. For a long time. Then she said, "Usually, it's from Santa," and the tension eased a little, and we laughed.

After walking through the grocery store Amy needed to sit down for a while. We found an apple tree and I climbed up to get an apple for each of us and we sat in the shade eating them. Her eyebrows went way up when she first bit into it, like she'd never had an apple before. For just a second she looked perfectly happy.

Then a varmint skittered over her ankle to disappear into a burrow and she shrieked and dropped the fruit on the ground and pulled her leg toward herself to scratch at it furiously, as though the six little feet had rendered the top layer of her skin unfit for purpose and she had to get it all under her fingernails instantly.

"Amy," I said. "Amy, it's okay, they won't hurt you - I can get you another apple - don't, you'll hurt yourself, Amy -"

She stopped scratching, but she'd started crying in the meantime, curled up on herself like her dog had died. I leaned over and hugged her tight. It would have been politer to ask, since I hadn't known her long, but I never saw anybody need a hug that badly. At least she didn't flinch or yell at me. She cried harder and leaned against my arm and shook like a campfire in the wind. People going in and out of the grocery store kept stopping to check on us and I waved them off with my other hand so they wouldn't interrupt Amy dealing with her feelings about - Santa, varmints, apples, homesickness - I didn't know what.

Eventually she stood up, very suddenly, and I sprang to my feet, ready to meet her wherever she wanted to go. She pointed in a random direction. "What's THAT," she said, as stilted as a six-year-old in a school play, but I played along.

"That's the art supply depot! Do you paint, or sculpt, or anything?" I asked. "Not that you have to for it to be a good stop, some people just like going through the bins of pretty rocks and buttons, and looking at canvases other people painted on and decided they didn't want, and collecting their favorites. If you wanted to make your own clothes that's where you'd go for that too, there's yarn and dye and everything."

Amy forged off toward the art supply depot without answering me, and I trotted just at her heel, worried she was overexerting herself and whatever the doctors had done wouldn't sustain her this far and I'd have to catch her and carry her to the dogcart. But she made it to the building and in through the doors and there distracted herself until she was smiling again, in the aisle full of dried branches and grasses for arranging with cut flowers.

I led her through the art supply store, and afterwards we found a place to sit with peaches and relatively fewer varmints, though she kept her feet tucked close to herself. After that I'd planned to take her to the swimming pond, and the woods up in the hills, but mulling on it over my peach, I changed my mind: she needed to be away from the varmints altogether for a little while, and you can only do that indoors. (They couldn't swim, but they did glide over the water quite well.)

So I took her to the library. She reacted to it a lot like the grocery store, hunting and hunting for something that wasn't there, finally asking me something about whether all our letters were shaped this way and whether there was a section specifically about things that happened a long time ago, no, longer ago than that. But eventually I pulled her away from the section on knitting patterns before they made her start crying again, and brought her up the stairs to the reading nooks.

The reading nooks were very small; each had just one beanbag or chair, and a window, and a little end table. Some people found them claustrophobic. I did too, sometimes. But if you want to get all the varmints out of a place, it has to be pretty small, because varmints are pretty small. If you have a shelf, they'll be on top of it; if you have a pile of things they'll be behind it. In a reading nook, I could pick up the beanbag and shake it, look at the baseboards and the windowsill, feel around the underside of the little table, be sure none were clinging to our clothes or the light fixture - and then shut the door.

Amy was holding a baking book in both hands, watching me in puzzlement. "Kelly?" she said. "What are you doing?"

"I think you need to not see a varmint for the next while and this was the best place I could think of to get completely for sure varmint-free," I said. "The reading rooms don't have dog doors."

"Oh." She sat on the beanbag, then scooted over so there was room for me, and when I didn't sit down right away she waved me down next to her. "Thank you. I'll probably get used to them, but..."

"If the climate's not right for them in Tintown I bet it'd be a little much coming here, they get everywhere!" I said.

"Yeah." Amy laughed shakily. "They really... really do. I just... this seems like a nice place to live in most ways but I *hate* them -"

I knew people who were afraid of spiders and people who got jumpy around larger dogs. I knew people who were nervous about heights, and going to the doctor, and thunderstorms.

Amy didn't talk like that. She might be scared of them, but she was also *angry* at them. Angry at *varmint*s. It didn't make sense to be angry at a dumb animal like that.

Which could have just been Amy being weird except -

Sometimes my dad seemed angry at them, too. He was fed up with them, he wanted them out of his house and kept shooing them no matter how many times they came back in. *He* was never scared - but he was angry.

"Something about Santa makes people *mad* at varmint,s," I muttered. "I bet I'll feel real stupid when I hear it for real, I bet it'll feel like it should've been obvious."

"I don't think it is, actually," said Amy, after a silence. "I think I would've thought before it'd be obvious. But now I've been here a few days - it's not at all, I think, if you grow up in Hollow Grove."

"Well, I guess that makes me feel better."

We sat there squashed shoulder to shoulder by the contours of the beanbag for a while. It could have been ten minutes or forty. And finally Amy got up.

"I can walk now," she said. "Let's go. I didn't move to Hollow Grove to be scared into a library by stupid varmints."

So I stood up too, and we finished the tour I'd planned out and then took the dogcart back to her cousin Ron's.

After about a week Amy was used to walking enough that she didn't need the cart, and could go from the Plum Grove to the town center, or even to a farther neighborhood, without needing a rest on the way. She had terrible balance if she tried to run, and she'd crash into things or stumble, but she could walk. It made it easier to take her places. Instead of just the center of town with all its benches and picnic tables I could bring her on gentle little hikes.

"Did you have a cart or something back in Tintown?" I asked, unpacking our lunch at the top of Silver Cascade.

"Something," she said. "Not with a dog. Hardly anybody has a dog as a pet there, I'd seen them before but only in zoos. I mean, uh, in - where they were - on display, not like -"

"Dogs in zoos! What an idea - do you want to see the zoo, today? It's a lot of walking but maybe you're up for it now."

She stared at me. "You have a zoo?"

"Why wouldn't we have a zoo?" I asked. "Not everything lives in the wild around here. There's penguins, and bears, and rats, and snakes, and stuff like that."

Amy was still staring at me. "I wasn't expecting Hollow Grove to have its own zoo."

"You didn't seem surprised about the... playground, or the library, or the -"

"No, I - those things I expected, even if I didn't know just what they'd be like."

"But you didn't expect us to have a zoo at *all* ," I said, bewildered.

"Never mind. I'd love to see it," said Amy.

I hesitated for a minute before deciding that this was probably more Santa nonsense. I led her to the gate that let visitors in to the zoo, through the high wall that would keep an escape artist creature inside, explaining as I went: "They give all the flighted birds their own tags, so they can find them if they get out. One time a heron escaped and that was how they got it, though I think it hurt itself getting trapped in somebody's kitchen, first. But if a snake gets out they'd rather it not have a chance to get that far, it would be hard to tag a snake."

"You could give it a chip. Under the skin," said Amy distantly.

"I guess you could, but it seems like it'd scare the snake, wouldn't it? Maybe they do it with the bears, those they can train to hold still for vet checkups and they could put in a chip then." The exhibit closest to the entrance was the penguins, who might be easy to tag but couldn't fly away. There was a placard up, and the zookeeper waved at us from where she was giving the birds their smelly fishy lunch. When we were done with the penguins we saw the meerkats, and went through the dark building full of bats, and swung through the aquarium section, and -

"No," said Amy, looking at the petting zoo.

"I guess we're a little too old for it," I said, but she was making that face again.

"Yeah."

I let her get away with the excuse. We moved on to the monkeys, the waterfowl all together in their pond, the elephants. They gave the elephants art supplies, and one was painting. It was cute, though the picture didn't look like much.

We'd coincided with a whole group of schoolkids, and met them at the elephant enclosure. "Elephants are very smart animals!" said their tour leader. "A snake can be happy all alone eating already-dead mice in a box that's the right temperature. Not an elephant! An elephant needs friends and activities. A wild elephant wouldn't have paint, of course, but they're smart enough to adapt to the kinds of hobbies we can offer them here in the zoo. And they need elephant friends, but they like humans, too. Actually, elephants think we're *cute*!"

I looked at Amy.

Her gaze was locked on the tour leader. His attention was on the kids - but he glanced our way for a moment - saw Amy, saw me - *wincing*, a tiny fraction of a microexpression that I would have missed if I hadn't been watching so closely.

A varmint ran along the top of the fence that separated the visitors from the elephants.

I knew who Santa Claus was.

We were back in the library, to the reading room, a space so featureless that you could be sure no little critters were watching from any hidden nooks. It didn't have enough room to pace and I was doing it anyway.

"Okay, so what's the *honey* about?" I asked, turning around and around in the tiny room so quickly I was getting dizzy.

"They're not letting you have sugar any other way," said Amy. "And you have to get the honey from the bees. We'll sometimes be out of *everything* for a week and have to live on what we have in the pantry till a new shipment comes in, but some of what we buy is sugar and it's hard, to give it up."

"You said 'we'," I said, finally giving up on pacing and sitting on the floor instead. I straightened my legs out - they just barely fit in the width of the room - and touched my toes, trying to stretch away the tension all through my body.

"...I know I can't go back but I did grow up there."

"Why can't you go back?" I asked, giving up on the stretch to throw up my hands. "Why shouldn't you come here, get your legs fixed, and turn right around, if that's what you'd rather?"

"I could... but then nobody else could. That's not what they're about. The *varmints* ." She spat the word. "I could go insist on being released into the wild right now and then next time somebody needed to come to Hollow Grove they'd say, nope, you're a wild human and you're going to die of fume rot like a wild human, or you're going to stay blind from that workshop accident like a wild human, Hollow Grove is not *for* the *wild humans* and our *experimental program* demonstrated that wild humans under these conditions don't *adapt well* . They're not a charity."

If I wasn't a wild human, what *was* I - I knew the answer, but I couldn't think it straight on, not yet. "What's a charity?"

"A - giving people stuff just to be nice. Tintown's hanging on, trading with any species who want anything we can do, and then there's Hollow Grove, doing the thing they really want, trading for things we can't afford, and you don't even know it."

"The adults know it."

"Yeah."

"I think my sister almost left."

"Could be."

If Rachel had left I'd have thought she just wanted to move to Tintown for - I didn't know what reason I would have invented. A boy. The climate. Career ambitions. And then I would have found out at the appointed time who Santa was, where all our Christmas presents came from, what was maintaining the plants and the stores and the clinic and the mountains all around all sides of the valley that held Hollow Grove.

"So in the library you were looking for..."

"There's probably a basement," sighed Amy. "For grownups. *Most* people in Hollow Grove know all about it. I was wasting time looking in the shelves you were able to show me."

I let a silence hang for a moment. Then: "You wanted to see if we had books about things that happened a long time ago."

"Yeah. - it wasn't the varmints," she said. "I hate them but it wasn't them. They didn't *help* during the - the war, do you know what a war is - but they swooped in to save all the species and they let all the humans left decide, if they wanted to be - wild, still, without anyone protecting them and taking care of them, except they're making sure no one destroys the planet because *Hollow Grove* is on it."

The window out of the reading room was half-obscured by a cherry tree, an everbearing variety that always had a bunch of ripe ones even as flowers bloomed and leaves shivered in the wind. Beyond that I could see the mountains. People hiked in them. It was allowed. There were waterfalls and stuff. And probably one of the times I'd gone to the doctor as a little girl they'd tucked a tracker

under my skin, so if I grew up to become a very accomplished mountain climber, they'd be able to find me on the other side and bring me home before I, a stupid zoo-bred lost bird, could wedge into a varmint's oven trying to eat its dinner and burn myself.

"Do they talk?" I asked. It was an absurd image, like a five-year-old's playdate with a sockpuppet, a varmint talking -

"Not out loud and not to us."

"To who?"

"Each other. They can just think at each other, they're doing it all the time. They can write. They've gotten better at - pretending like they're people, when they write? But if you read their first attempts it's so offputting it's funny..."

I thought vaguely that I should be asking who *did* "do it". Who it was that made it so all the species, humans and elephants and cherry trees alike, needed rescuing. But I didn't actually want to and I didn't actually have to and Amy wasn't bringing it up. So I let it lie. On another day, I could learn who it was, who'd reduced us from some previous height of wild untamed civilization, to this. "Is it nice," I said. "Being wild."

There was a very long silence. Then Amy said, "I think maybe the only nice thing about being wild is *knowing* that you're wild. It probably used to be nicer. Before. But I'm not even sure about that."

"But it's nice to know? That you're wild?"

I almost thought she wouldn't answer me, she thought so long about that one. She was staring at the cherry tree, the flowers and the ripening fruit and the green curves of the leaves.

Finally she said, "It is if you're angry. If you're angry it's the best thing. If you're really, really angry, it's better than having a dog or apples or paint or legs that work. I didn't have all that much being angry in me."

We sat there, watching the branch quiver and the sun lean west into a pool of color.

"If I stepped on a varmint," I said, "what would happen?"

"Nothing. You won't catch one and if you did they wouldn't care. It'd be like getting a teeny, tiny scratch on your leg, losing one varmint out of the whole mess of them."

I took Amy to the cookout like usual and we had lamb chops and corn on the cob and grilled mushrooms covered in herbs that my dad ground up into a pasty goop. She went home. She didn't need me to escort her places any more.

I helped scrub char off the grill, as it cooled off after the last food was plated. My dad went around collecting plates full of bones and cobs and skewers.

"You all right, Kelly?" he asked.

I scrubbed. They'd known, right? Everybody had known when I made friends with a transfer student that she might Santa me. It was an accepted risk.

I looked around to make sure the kids were all inside. I waited till the Feng twins were past their threshold, on their way to bed; I watched a varmint slip through after the door closed behind them, through the swinging dog flap. The Fengs did have a dog, trained to let itself out and fertilize a grape vine whenever it needed to, but it was obvious, now, that that wasn't the real reason all our houses were designed to let smaller animals in. When I looked around

again the faint glow of the vineyard lights winking down from the tops of all the trellises revealed no more children. I didn't count.

"Amy and I went to the zoo today," I said. My dad was pretty smart. He'd figure it out. But just in case he wasn't sure, wasn't allowed to talk to me freely without being surer: "I discovered the true meaning of Christmas."

He snorted. Touched his eye like he'd gotten a fleck of something in it. "Oh, just you wait till you actually learn the true meaning of Christmas. They won't let us have churches."

I didn't know what a church was. I intended to put off finding out. "When you decided," I said. "It wouldn't have been too long ago, would it, for you to have decided -?"

"Your mother was already pregnant with Rachel," he said, not making me finish formulating the question. "I sort of thought... that we'd go, after we had her, after we had you, after we were done having children."

"You didn't."

"Your mother wasn't as conflicted as I was. She was all for Hollow Grove right away. Not *instead of* Tintown, but with both of them established she knew which one she wanted to be in. We kept putting off even talking seriously about it. She said, they don't have disposable diapers there, or anything to fix it quick if one of the girls breaks an arm. And then it was, look how much Kelly loves applesauce, look how much Rachel loves swimming, Kelly's going to be so tall if we let her, Rachel's friends are all here... *our* friends were all here, too, by then."

He patted my shoulder and walked me back to the house. I followed him, watching varmints' shadows against the sky as they glided to and fro on their inscrutable errands. We went inside. He reached for the broom, then dropped his arm and sighed. There

were varmints in the house and they'd leave when they left and they'd be replaced with more. It didn't matter. They acted like dumb animals and it didn't matter, if they heard us, what they thought - anything short of what they'd consider grounds to release us into the wild, and I trusted my dad to know.

"You were..." He shook his head and went to fall into a chair in the living room. "Kelly, you were so safe and happy, you were so *healthy*. They're good at that. I had a little brother and he was crying, all the time, when he was a baby - gas pain, teething, noises you've never heard in your life keeping him up when he was sleepy. And you just didn't. They didn't think those particular privations were going to help you be a fully well-rounded human so you didn't have them... you played outside with your friends and got blueberries in your hair, because we never had a chance to put you in front of a television with a soda and get you hooked on it..."

"And I looked into leaving anyway, once," he added, voice lower. "And it turned out it didn't matter. I couldn't have taken you girls with me. Even if your mother had come too. They were harder to communicate with back then and I'd thought - they said we could go wild any time we felt ready for the unbuffered world. I thought obviously with our kids. They didn't mean it that way."

I thought about him sweeping varmints off the dining table and shooing them out the dog door. "Do you wish you'd understood the rules before Rachel was born? Would we have been born in Tintown then?"

"No." The answer came quickly. "Your mother would have sooner left me. Maybe I could've withstood it, risking your - your health and safety, to join the last free human beings, maybe I would've talked myself into it, but she wouldn't, not if there was any other way, not unless she was the last fertile woman on Earth, and she wasn't. So in the end it didn't make any difference, all our

postponed arguments. This was the only place you could've been born, kiddo."

We always kept a chessboard on the coffee table, reset to starting position every time someone finished a game. I was sitting closer to white. I moved a pawn, silently, and we finished out a distracted chess match without speaking further. A varmint sat behind my dad on the back of the couch, another one on the bookshelf, one clinging to the molding around the doorframe that led to the kitchen. They were listening. They probably understood some of what we were saying, even if there was a lot of detail lost on them. They'd been there all my life and it had never been possible for me to grow up without them.

I could leave. I knew how, I knew who I'd talk to now that I knew what I'd be talking to them about, it was obvious that I'd go to the Enrichment Committee. I could leave all this behind forever and see what Tintown was like, and try sugar that didn't come from honey, and never have a varmint follow me into my room again.

My dad checkmated me. I hugged him, and I went outside to look up at the moon. It was full, showing off the great scar-line across its face and all its craters in glowing detail.

It gave me enough light to run.

I could see the outlines of buildings and trees, loosely, enough to know where I was going. I could not see the ground, or my own feet, only feel the grass and moss and dirt where my heels struck the ground and my toes dug in to push off. I didn't need to. The paths between the grapes had nothing worse than leaves and grape-stems among them; the streets were plush and flat and free of stones and roots. I ran till the wind whistled in my ears and my chest heaved and my eyes streamed from the night air.

I ran as fast as I could, but I never managed to step on a varmint.

Scour

"The important thing to remember," said Danielle, securing bandages around her undamaged fingers and staring directly into her phone camera, "is that scouring *doesn't* kill you. It helps other things kill you, but you can deal with all of those effects with adequate preparation and aftercare. That's what this is all about." She flexed her wrapped-up hands and resumed covering herself in gauze. She'd edit it into a sped-up montage later. Assuming scouring didn't kill her.

When she was all bandaged and earplugged and dressed and full of painkillers, she ran through her checklist of things to pack. Engine oil canister. Bottled water. Huge tub of petrolatum sealed in its package. Spares of everything she needed for the mission itself, especially net guns. Snacks like she was going to a blood drive. Climbing equipment in case she wound up in a crevasse. "It's not likely I'll have a bad fall," she told the camera. "Bucko has a scour radius of just eight and a half feet and usually travels at an altitude of four. But it's better to be overprepped for a stumble into a ditch shallower than I am tall, than to wind up in a canyon living on my juice and cookies till an emergency helicopter can come fetch me!"

She laid out her map for the camera. "Coming up on noon. Fun time to go into the desert, right? It'll take me about twenty minutes to make it to the intercept point," she said, pointing it out and tracing her fingers along Bucko's usual route and hers. "It's supposed to show up at my chosen site in about an hour at its usual speed, so I have a little time before I go set up my ambush. The good news is that if I have to pee by the time I get there, I won't anymore once I've gotten close enough to good old Bucko. These bandages are staying on for the duration."

Danielle folded the map and stuck it in her bag's outer pocket. She wasn't going to need it, she'd practiced, but again, better to overprep. She checked the weather forecast and the satellite tracking of Bucko's progress. She told her emergency contacts that everything was go. She tested the tow bar on the back of the dune buggy. She mentioned her sponsors, the concierge medicine startup that wanted Bucko for themselves and the net gun manufacturers and the Angel Research Foundation. And then she mounted her phone in the buggy, loaded the bags, and set out across the desert.

Throughout the drive she sipped water. "Is bottled water dirty?" she asked the camera rhetorically. "No, of course not, at least not around here! But a lot of things your body makes out of water are both icky and important, and if you have to replace them all of a sudden, you're gonna want to be *sloshing* ." She took a swig and splashed herself as she went over a bump. "Whoops. Good thing it's hot as the dickens out here, I'll dry off in no time." She picked up a salt pill, waved it at the phone, and swallowed it. "Electrolytes!"

Danielle fell silent for a minute. Most people weren't going to want to watch a full uncut version with all the awkward pauses even if she did publish it, so she wasn't going to. She spoke again when she had something to say. "So, why Bucko? Bucko's small, center mass not much bigger than an exercise ball, and has a predictable route. It's not hurting anybody, it's just going back and forth between its two egress points every couple days like it has for fifteen years - fifty hours plus or minus three, with occasional skipped journeys we don't know the pattern for. If I caught a big car-size guy like Cosine or the Kentucky Furrower I could prevent a lot of very expensive ecological and property damage and sometimes medical bills when people don't evac in time. So why little Bucko?"

She crested over a dune and checked her heading. "Well, for one thing, big angels'd be harder to catch. I wouldn't need a dune buggy, I'd need a tank. Instead of a normal tow bar plus some doodads I'd need something much longer and sturdier. I'd probably

need a whole team. And while it's very noble when people try to catch angels just to get them off people's backs, that's not what I'm about today. I want to catch Bucko and then keep it - in a town, in a building, not tethered in midair above a research institution crossed with a zoo. Because the thing is, scouring *doesn't kill you.* "

She drank some more water. She really did have to pee, now, but Bucko would fix that soon. She scratched an itch under the bandage that stretched across the bridge of her nose. "People recover from getting scoured all the time. Even if they're not prepared like I am right now, it's less dangerous than plenty of other stuff that can happen to you. Like infections. Like poisoning. Like plaque in your veins and built-up toxins your organs can't handle. That's why my sponsors include the Oyster Group, pioneering new ways to treat some of the most intractable medical problems out there. If everything works out the way we hope, you'll soon be able to go visit Bucko yourself, and get rolled in all bandaged up and full of water into its radius, and then out again to recover from scouring. It'll be overkill for a cold. But if you get gangrene? If your liver is wrecked? If you come home from vacation with ebola? If your kid didn't tell you about a raccoon bite till it was too late? Bucko'll be right there to help you out. And with scourings occurring under controlled conditions the recovery process can probably be streamlined, so you'll have an easier time than I'm expecting to have this afternoon."

Another sip. She was going to be really glad she'd gotten through this bottle in a few minutes but at the moment drinking felt onerous. "I'm almost there," she told the camera. "I can see Sinner's Rock. I don't know why it's called that and neither does Google, but I'll be there in a few minutes, before Bucko arrives. I don't see it yet."

Danielle parked the dune buggy in the shade of the tall rock and disembarked, bringing her phone with her. "I'm gonna unzip my bags, so I don't have to try to handle the little zipper pulls with scoured fingers," she explained. "And over here you can see Bucko's

usual route. It goes *almost* the same way every time, but sometimes there are deviations - over there you can see the ditch it creates diverge and then come together again. Maybe it saw something shiny. Maybe it was flying drunk, though I guess by recorded appearances it's not old enough for drinking to be legal! And I'm going to wait right here, and when it comes by, out come the net guns."

She finished off the bottle and then sipped more water out of her CamelBak. "I won't be able to talk very well after I've encountered Bucko face to not-a-face," she told the camera. "But I'll go back and do some voiceovers, okay? - Here it comes!"

She turned the camera around. In the distance, Bucko was bobbing placidly along its route, four feet above the average ground level in unaffected areas (but of course more than eight feet away from any actual dirt). Bigger angels would carve canyons beneath them, annihilating humus and subsoil and everything else in their radius until they hit bedrock and polished it clean. A lot of ancient rivers looked like they'd been paths for the angels long ago, but Bucko crossed a desert, appearing a few clicks northwest of Sinner's Rock and trundling down to disappear again a ways south, and no water filled in its tracks of vanished sand. Which was among the reasons Danielle had picked this target. There were other small angels but this one wouldn't drown her trying to escape and also didn't require her to travel to Russia or anything.

Bucko was white, blindingly bleachy bone white, reflecting the afternoon sun with such enthusiasm that no features could be made out besides a shifting silhouette. Angels varied considerably in form, but they usually approximated spherical symmetries; you didn't see ones shaped like snakes or squares. They had protrusions, sometimes something like a wing or a tentacle or even a hand, scattered all over themselves. Closer examination of some captives had revealed that they had divots in their central bodies, colloquially "eyes", though it was impossible to tell if they could see with them

or for that matter without them. Bucko was a pretty normal looking angel apart from being small. "I count six wings, but some photos of Bucko show ten or eleven," she remarked. "It must have some folded or held in front of or behind itself. I think it looks brighter in person, wow, Bucko, do you tile yourself with whitening strips..." She'd edit that out later if she decided it was babbling.

The phone went into her shirt pocket with the hole for the camera, which she buttoned shut so it wouldn't slip out. The net gun went propped up on her shoulder. "Almost showtime," she muttered.

Bucko didn't seem afraid of her. Angels usually took little to no notice of people, or animals, or anything else in their paths. It went along its route, rustling and folding and stretching and unfurling its wings. When it got close enough that Danielle could hear its high-pitched hum and taste the odorless, sterile, particle-free air that wafted past it, she fired.

She had several loaded net guns and she needed them all. In theory some of them were there to give her safety margin if she missed, but also, angels levitated; tangling up their wings would certainly *bother* one but it wouldn't keep it from zooming away. So she needed weights on the nets, and several such nets, to drag Bucko down. It was stronger than she'd expected, but not stronger than she'd made contingency preparations for. The last net saw it - well, not land. It destroyed the sand beneath it and there wasn't bedrock close to the surface. It was still floating. But the last net made it stop being able to travel.

"Now for the hard part," Danielle told her phone, and she advanced on the angel.

The bandages made themselves useful immediately. All the dead skin on her body, every cell of it, starting with her outstretched hands, was gone: not killed, not shed, but vanished altogether. Like a peeled sunburn or an oddly precise road rash, it left her tender

head to toe, and the tight constricting gauze reassuringly snug. Her raw living skin would be producing exudate, but Bucko destroyed that too. She'd start soaking her bandages once she was out of range.

She didn't have to pee anymore. Her intestines cramped like she was coming off the worst stomach bug of all time and had spent the last twenty-four hours on the can. Her eyes were painfully dry, though at least there was no dust that could land in them here at Bucko's side. Her nose started bleeding, which she felt mostly as a twinge up in her sinuses; the leaking blood itself disappeared before it could appear on her upper lip. Danielle started counting seconds: none of those things were going to be the end of her, but being unable to sweat, in the desert, could be. Desperately, she resisted the urge to cough: if she did she'd tear up her throat and to no avail. She'd just have to drink more water as soon as Bucko was secure.

She got the end of the tow rope around the angel, knotted it with smarting stinging fingers. If it got too close during the trip back to town, not only would a second scouring damage Danielle further, it'd clear all the lubricant out of the engine; that was why she had spare oil, safely in a container so it didn't "count". Angels usually left things alone if they were packaged, but oil sloshing around to keep the motor from seizing wouldn't enjoy that protection.

Except for her hands screaming at her that she was badly injured, there weren't any hiccups in getting the angel tethered a safe distance and angle from the buggy. Since she was driving on sand, that distance was much more than Bucko's radius - when it destroyed the sand behind her wheels, she needed a buffer to avoid sliding backward with the subsidence.

At long last she got the whole setup clipped into place, double-checked it, and moved more than eight and a half feet away. Her bandages clung wetly once the exudate wasn't constantly vanished. Her nosebleed - nosebleeds plural, it seemed to be both sides now -

drizzled freely into her mouth. She succumbed to her coughing fit for a moment, then desperately gnawed the bite valve. Her teeth were unharmed and frictionlessly clean, like she'd gone to a wizard dentist, and she chomped water down her parched throat. Saliva wasn't clean enough for an angel. The air shifting around her was pulling moisture from the gauze, blessedly cooling.

She took a few minutes, sitting in the driver's seat of her buggy, to re-equilibrate herself. She'd never been scoured before. It was a little worse than she'd expected. She was no longer really confident in the business model of the medical people, though admittedly she wasn't dead, and some possible patients would just be going to stick a foot or an arm in for a toenail fungus or a blood cleanse that could stand to take a few heartbeats. Their sinuses would be fine, and also they wouldn't be driving for twenty minutes through the desert afterwards.

The phone went back in its dashboard mount. She smiled at it a little shakily, though her lips twinged. Managed a thumbs-up. Tilted it so the camera could see Bucko, twitching in the nets and tethered behind the buggy and eroding bits of desert that slid into the pit beneath its bulk.

Then she took a few more deep breaths, drank more water, choked down more salt pills and a bottle of apple juice for her skin to turn into more ooze and sweat, and checked the oil. She was pretty sure Bucko hadn't gotten close enough, but no point in being stupid about it. The oil level was fine, the hood reassuringly grimy. Fuel gauge looked good too, though that was less likely to run afoul of an angel's overzealous cleansing.

She started up the buggy. It drowned out the angel's high whine. With a wide turn so she wouldn't accidentally slam her quarry into Sinner's Rock, Danielle began the drive back to town.

It wound up taking nearly forty minutes to pull Bucko onto the road and into the designated site where Oyster Group planned to build the holding area. The bumps were brutal on her sensitive not-quite-abrasions, so she went around anything treacherous-looking, and outside of Bucko's radius there was plenty of kicked-up sand to get in her eyes and work its way under her bandages so she kept stopping to blink and brush herself clean. She kept needing to drink more juice. The cookies proved to be too sharp and crisp for her tongue and cheeks, which felt like she'd inhaled scalding soup; she dissolved some in one of the bottles of water and drank the slurry, instead.

As soon as she got the buggy into the build site, medics popped out of their temporary trailer offices and swarmed her. Giving Bucko a wide berth, they got Danielle onto a stretcher, and started gradually unbandaging her. They'd known what to expect; they had lidocaine spray with antibacterial ointment in it, ready for every inch. Bucko had killed all her skin bacteria, but there were plenty more microbes where those came from excited to colonize her open dermis. Once she was sprayed in a given area they put fresh bandages on. Somebody gave her IV fluids; somebody gave her probiotics in the one direction; there was a fecal transplant ready for her razed guts. Someone was gingerly rubbing olive oil into her scalp. She'd cut her hair in advance, since being utterly deprived of all its oil was a good way for hair to go haywire, but she hadn't shaved her head.

The spray was a godsend. She took a few deep breaths at long last. Blinked in exhausted satisfaction at Bucko where it wriggled on the end of its tow bar. The Oyster folks had long poles with which to push it along, and four redundant hardpoints embedded in the clinic foundation to which it could be attached. The foundation was twelve feet deep of nothing but reinforced concrete. Nothing for Bucko to erode. And the walls would be built around it, well out of range, and everything else would follow.

Danielle let herself fall unconscious while the medics worked on patching her up. Human beings were not meant to be so clean.

When she came around, she was in the clinic-trailer. It reminded her of mobile blood drives. A nurse was sitting nearby, playing some game on her phone that had chirpy music and extravagant sound effects. Her nametag said HETTY.

"What time's it," mumbled Danielle. Her lips felt greasy; probably they'd put industrial amounts of chapstick on her.

"Almost six. You had a nice little nap there. How's your mouth, do you think you could eat something?"

"Somethin' soff," Danielle replied, repressing a yawn that might have cracked the corners of her mouth.

"Of course!" The trailer had Jello, naturally, but when Danielle managed to get that down Hetty followed it up with some overboiled macaroni that was melding with its cheese sauce, then a milkshake, that she sent someone to the nearest diner for. It turned out that in addition to making her dehydrated, getting scoured had rendered Danielle ravenous. Hetty went on to say, "Everything's going okay with the angel, it's tied down and the foundation seems to be fully intact. The contractors expect to get the walls and roof up around it in the next couple days. You did a great job."

Danielle smiled. In a few more days she'd have enough skin to feel halfway to normal and Oyster Group would have the angel forever to save people who really needed a good scrubbing-out, even one like this. Heck, long term her heart would probably thank her for it. "Phone?" she said.

"Right here." The nurse had even plugged it in.

Recording underway, Danielle smiled for the camera. "Here I am again, folks. The Oyster clinicians have patched me up good, I feel

so much better. Sounds like Bucko's settling in well, we can go have a look at its new digs once I'm up and about. Boy, was that unfun! But it'll all be worth it when somebody with flesh-eating bacteria or something like that goes in and comes out again, nice and cleaned up." She slurped the last dregs of her milkshake, winking at the phone.

Then she turned the recording off and relaxed back into her bed. Super-soft sheets, just what the doctor ordered for a scouring patient.

"Do you hear that, or is it my tinnitus," said Hetty.

"Hear what?"

"That noise - it's probably someone listening to some awful music on the radio, only I don't hear a car -"

Danielle strained her ears. They were waxless and the earplugs had kept out the sand; they should be working fine. There was a thin whine...

"Isn't that Bucko?"

"No, Bucko's higher pitched, my old ears can't hear it at all."

They both listened, and then Danielle said -

"It's getting closer."

Hetty got to her feet and drew the curtain that covered the trailer window. Danielle pulled herself to a sitting position over her body's protests.

They remained like that, still and staring, until Danielle grabbed her phone to record: a shaky video, almost soundless, of an advancing angel the size of a house. It obliterated the dirt beneath it at such a

radius that the trailer started to shake, though the angel was nearly a mile off. It sang, high and harsh.

It was the spitting image of Bucko, which was now more than three hours late to its egress.

Danielle overrode every pain signal in her body, and she ran.

Conductor

"Will I ever be able to do music again?" I asked. "If the war ends one day?"

"They're working on it," said the neurosurgeon, which meant *no*, and then the anesthesia kicked in.

My mom cried when I said I wanted to study music. My brother was a weapons tech, my sisters were a physical therapist and a regular therapist, and Mom herself had done payroll and accounting for the Armada. All, she told me, perfectly respectable ways of contributing to the war effort, which didn't require any brain surgery at all.

Dad had been the musician. I'd never heard a note out of him, of course, but they didn't surgically excise his *genes*, and I'd gotten the right ones. Or the wrong ones. Mom didn't put tunes on at home, but she sent us to school and they had music classes, and it clicked, for me. And the last thing she wanted was for me to turn out like Dad.

They'd stayed married, at least on paper. Dad lived in the in-law unit, up in the attic, after he came home from his tour. Sometimes came down to eat dinner with us. It's possible they occasionally had little sleepovers, though everybody went out of their way not to make the details common knowledge. But they didn't really have conversations, anymore, afterwards. They couldn't be on the same page. It wasn't that she missed her beloved musician to talk about neoclassical with. She didn't know a chord from a chorus. It was what they'd replaced it with.

She cost me some sleep, but I didn't let her dissuade me. They put the music classes in school for a reason, along with the the dance,

everything from ballet to ballroom. Somebody had to pick it up and gorge themselves on it and become a connoisseur, a creator, a tastemaker, and then give it all up for the war. As though there was a collections bucket for it, next to the ones for refrigerator magnets and prewar diamonds.

I had a CO, also a conductor. I'd seen her in action, when I was in basic training pre-surgery. They had to make sure that in addition to rhythm and discernment we'd also be able to keep up with the military discipline and the physical requirements. Anybody who washed out at that stage got to stay on Earth with all of their neurons where they grew, and became a music *teacher*. Past junior high that was the kind of person who did most of my music pedagogy. My mom was probably praying for it to be me next with all her heart, but I held up fine under a couple extra Gs and could say "sir" when I was supposed to, so.

Anyway, they'd shown me video of my now-CO conducting a battle. She'd managed to keep her facility with the baton, so her relay station was arranged around her like a full orchestra, and she whipped her hands around in a frenzy, and a billion aliens perished.

She'd been panting with exertion at the end, grinning with artistic ecstasy. She'd taken a bow.

Aliens have computers too. By and large they're just as good as ours, and anywhere they're not up to par, the aliens can get ahold of some of ours and get there. Computers can make music too, even invent new music if they're set to it properly. Making them dance is harder but it's a decade harder, not a century. If bopping around to novel tunes were what it took to blow the enemy out of the sky and take their smithereen-laden moon outposts and ruptured stations, we'd be just about evenly matched with everyone else in the war of all against all. The fact that humans can hack it without the doodads

if called upon to do so doesn't help at all when everybody who's coming to the party is already starfaring. They think our sense of timing gave us a bit of an edge in a couple of battles, but we were fighting uphill, new entrants to the front without established detentes or any weaponry well adapted to the field of combat. Being able to coordinate on "three, two, one, go!" was not nearly as lethal as phase injectors or infraplasma.

So it's not quite right to say that humanity's unique attunement to rhythm is what we're leveraging to survive out there. Computers are great at keeping time and everybody's got them. We can't echolocate, but you don't see us dropping like flies to enemies that can, we just build stuff that compensates.

Computers don't have taste. You can tell them the win conditions for chess or go, and they'll figure out how to beat grandmasters, even if they're just meditating and masturbating about it all by themselves with no exposure to any other players. And you can show them a hundred million songs, and they will learn to make something that's sort of like those. You can order the pieces by some metric that might correlate with quality, like popularity or critical reception or even how much each piece influenced those that came after, and then the computer can spit out stuff that's farther along on those metrics. Specify anything you want, and it'll spin up your pack-a-day smoker with a warbling baritone crooning about leaving his lover in Lisbon with backing vocals in Proto-Indo-European and accompanying zither.

But it won't *like* it.

You can make them lie! You can have a conversation with a computer that tells you how much it appreciates the theme and the alliteration and that little lick in the bridge and the stylistic influences of the zither. It'll pretend for you all day long. But it doesn't like it. It doesn't enjoy anything. You can train it to tell a more consistent story, get it so it'll guess it's supposed to like Beethoven and not

Bach, or the Beatles and not the Beastie Boys, and give it a song it's never heard before from one or the other and get the answer you were hoping for. If it's figured out that it's "supposed" to be a fan of some artist, because you told it so or because it made up a persona to please you, it's not going to later decide of its own accord that it's moved on from that phase, or that this one song of theirs isn't quite hitting the spot. It's never having any aesthetic experiences.

And neither do aliens.

Basic training, and then surgery, and then a lot of bed rest while I recovered from surgery and worried at my new synaesthesia like a missing tooth or a nearly-loose scab. My hair grew into its military regulation cut from shaved-down surgical status, and they started putting me on the simulations.

I didn't have the baton muscle memory any more. No cinematic wand-waving for me. I tried metronoming my hand around, but it connected to nothing, meant nothing. I might as well have been attempting to control the tide by doing Kegels. I hummed a note and it mostly just made me hungry. It reminded me of the microwave at home.

The conductor's baton makes for great example videos, but they have a standard setup for people whose brain-scrambling doesn't come out so picture-perfect and they trained me on that. It was a little like a very complicated video game, at first. The re-mapping can't come to the fore until you've got enough basic skill to get all the little imaginary ships to do what you want. I did the tedious basic exercises: send this squadron to orbit that star. Dispatch one of your drones to the target orbital. Send fighters to the third moon, but, ooh, at the same time, also withdraw fighters from the second moon, without getting mixed up, exciting, yay.

The controls were intended to be easy to pick up, but you need a lot of degrees of freedom for this to work at all, so there were a lot of them and they were very finely responsive. I was weeks in the ergonomic chair, scowling at pretend destroyers and corvettes, blowing up the wrong enemy cruisers and having to start over. As a video game, it was not very fun. The commercial version for propagandizing teenagers has more noises and lights and achievements and fake blood. I was supposed to be getting something deeper out of it, but only once I had the facility with the machinery that I had once had with a hundred-chair symphony orchestra.

I took a very normal amount of time to get that click. Two months, six days. The mission of the hour was to coordinate eight battalions in a complicatedly interdependent slingshot maneuver to ambush and annihilate the enemy where it was scattered through an asteroid belt. I was on my fourth try. I was pretty sure my attempts were basically by-the-book and I was just making some minor timing error with the gravity interactions, and I was giving it yet another go, this time with my wrist brace cinched up a bit tighter.

I tried turning off one of the ships' phase booster for a split second, so it lagged the others. I wasn't sure why I did it, the way you aren't sure why you're adding a grace note.

The battalions swung around in a gorgeous arc and slammed with spine-tingling crunchy dissonance into the simulated opponents. With everything tuned to concert-A, I swept through the debris with my virtuoso torpedo launcher at the root of a minor seventh, and ten thousand aliens perished.

I was laughing. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever done.

Dad didn't often talk about his tour of duty. It didn't come up most days. Fireworks didn't bother him. He didn't have nightmares. I don't

think he even went to therapy besides the couple's counselor. Despite Mom's chilliness, he came home from the war a functional person. He could talk about whatever was more relevant: whether we'd done our homework. What we wanted for dinner. Whether the screen door needed replacing or the shelter under the back yard needed its supplies rotated out or the neighbor with diamond earrings was using valuable ones cut before the bombardment or cheap new ones that didn't belong in a maser cannon array. (Usually. Pizza. Yes, probably, maybe.)

When I settled on my career plan, he opened up a little more. He'd start getting really animated, the way people do when they're remembering better-than-sex birthday cake or a drug-fueled religious experience or the sensation of skydiving. He'd say things like, "The ETs turned away from the north wing, but there we were in the *east* wing mezzo-piano-like, and we hit them sforzando," or, "Me and my buddy O'Connor had two fighters in adjacent bays, and it was like we were telepaths, we could strafe like a smooth bow change and shoot pizzicato at the same time together".

And then he'd stop. He'd look guiltily at the nearest evidence of my mother - a photo, her spot at the dining table, the general direction of the stairs. Me, sometimes, the eyebrows I got from her side of the family. And then he'd give some blander tidbit. "The food was all right," he'd say, "except when we were in the Orion zone." Or, "Sleeping in zero G isn't as comfortable as it looks like it should be." Or -

"Sometimes I wish I was still out there. My poor old veins can't take it any more, but if they did find a use for me..."

He'd been a violinist and he'd laid down his strings for his planet. I dug up the violin when I was twelve. It was in the basement, in its case next to the Christmas decorations. He couldn't play it any more and Mom wouldn't have it around us kids.

They were careful to keep the tense sad arguments away from us. I eavesdropped now and then, though. Caught the word "bloodthirsty".

He never was that. He just wanted to play again.

Imagine having fourteen songs stuck in your head at the same time, except that, through dream logic and the power of neurosurgery, they're also all spaceship formations with each ship contributing a bit of leitmotif to the whole of its squadron. They've all got to come in at just the same time except for the oboes, modulo relativistic dilation which feels sort of like syncopation and rubato had a baby six-part round conceived in a tokamak. You lose a couple of scouts and their descants fade out, but the rest of your force is crescendoing, scrambling up-tempo, trembling through phase depths with perfect vibrato. They obliterate the enemy and an orgasmic Ode to Joy cascades through your synapses.

Usually a conductor gets a week or two off after something like that.

It's a commonplace that if you tell someone you're going to have them compare a couple of different sound systems, but they're actually the same one and you just up the volume a couple of notches, your test subject will tell you that the louder one is the superior device. Richer, fuller sound, they'll tell you. It sounds clearer and brighter and *better*.

But you can't just follow that logic indefinitely, because the human ear has limitations. Eventually it'll start to hurt or be too intense to process.

There isn't such a limit on the human ability to conceptualize raw numbers.

If I had a wife to go home to, of course it would sound bad to her. It hasn't been in vogue to relish the deaths of your enemies for

hundreds of years. The fashionable response, among the civilians back home, is that it's very sad that we came of age in a universe wracked with warfare and negative-sum competition. That it is a terrible pity we've never found anyone we could make our allies, let alone friends, like old science fiction once promised us. That if only we had the means and the security to do so, the right thing to do would be to become the pacifistic watchdogs of the stars, gently putting violent species in time-out in their own systems till they were ready to play nice. That in principle each one of those aliens was a uniquely valuable individual with moral worth and rights just like us, embroiled in this struggle no less tragically than we were.

I put six hundred million aliens to rest and it moved me to tears.

If you know where a ship is going to be - in what phase, at what velocity, at what location, when precisely, and in which frame of reference - then you can lay a trap there. It's pretty easy. It almost never happens. Not being predictable like that is like not leaving your valuables visible in your car, or remembering to lock your front door. If people started forgetting to do those things, theft would get commoner until they remembered again, and the equilibrium is that loot is locked up and ships are bopping around according to random numbers.

Except human ships.

A computer can generate music. But if you ask a computer to *choose* music, it's just another way of generating a random number. An alien *could* plot ship trajectories that way, but why use such a convoluted method of rolling dice? More efficient to just have your pilot lay out a range of tactically acceptable paths and then stab in the dark. We won't be able to lay any traps for them and they'll get where they're going. If they winnow it down further, if they start trying to choose the *optimal* path, the most *efficient* or the one that performs well on some metric? Well, we have computers too. We

can figure out what those paths are, and if they stop locking their doors, we'll start blowing them up.

A computer *cannot* tell which path is *prettiest* .

I can.

My first shore leave back on Earth, Mom was purse-lipped and brisk. She hugged me. She asked me all the standard questions: are they feeding you enough, are you going to be here all month or were you going to spend some of your leave in the tropics, did your sister tell you she got a new puppy, did your brother tell you about the new baby. Nothing about my job.

Mom didn't like that I studied music, but back when it was possible I'd wash out and miss the operating table, she did appreciate it on some level. She'd come to recitals. She got me a nice stereo one Christmas. She would admit to having favorite songs, and if she had a glass of wine with dinner she'd put on some oldies to share with me.

She heard nothing lovely in my scatenato slaughter and she never would.

But Dad, my awkward distant dad who'd always acceded to the consensus that he was the strange one and the burden of fitting in was on him -

He wanted all the war stories. He wanted the declassified footage and the dramatic retellings and the frenzied tip-of-tongue desperation to communicate about my masterpieces.

When my leave was up I went back out to the war zone. I got a letter a few weeks later, to the effect that my parents were separating and my dad was moving into a veterans' retirement community.

The letter was pretty dry, but I could imagine it. Why should Dad have to put up with the way Mom treated him and his passion and his art? I was glad I'd been a catalyst to get him thinking about whether he wanted to live out his old age sort-of-cohabiting with such a cold fish who couldn't even try for vicarious enjoyment of the eroico extermination. She was blind to the sublime. Tone-deaf.

My mother and one of my sisters decided to stop speaking to me and Dad over it, but what was there to say between us anyway?

We're not winning.

We made a strong initial showing, by the standards of newly starfaring species who become threatening enough to be worth killing. This reference class is in contrast to "sitting on strategically important real estate enough to be worth killing", all of whom are dead, and also "longstanding enough participants in the war to have outlasted less effective peers", all of whom are much scarier than latecomers like us.

We have our aesthetic advantage, and the boffins do their darndest to catch up on all the technological states of the art as we gather it by salvage and spycraft. But anyone flying around out here has made it this far because they have something going for them. They outbreed us ten to one, or they have such permissive biological needs that they can go to space in a laundry basket with an engine strapped on, or they can hibernate undetectably on a planet that looks secure for six years and then hatch and eat everyone trying to settle it, or they've defeated an elder race and cannibalized their industrial base, or, or, or.

I don't think the sci-fi romantics will get their way and we'll all hold hands and sing together across the stars. It just doesn't seem like the universe worked out that way. We'll fight forever, or we'll win, or we'll lose.

But what's the point of being a human, anyway, if it's not to see your enemies driven before you, a polyphony of death and decelerando? - or whatever your medium is. The ballerinas do good work in their division too. I won't knock a fine painting or turn up my nose at a sculpture either.

I have held legions in my fingertips and commanded them through gorgeously human tessituras across the starfields of song and we have defended the folks back home, guardian angel voices in rhapsody. If the enemy gets me one of these days, I will go with threnody on my lips.

If only you could hear it.

Princess Innocence

Princess Innocence was never in the wrong. Sometimes, things happened all by themselves. Sometimes things happened because people made bad choices - but those people were never Princess Innocence.

For example, one day Princess Innocence went for a walk in the woods, and a crispy autumn leaf tumbled through the air and hit her right in the eye. It hurt really badly, and so Innocence set fire to the woods to burn up all the leaves so that it could never happen again. This meant that a lot of forest animals had to run headlong out of the trees and that the air was smoky for a few hours and that the royal firefighters had to work pretty hard to make sure that the fire didn't spread to the palace or the nearby villages. But of course it wasn't Princess Innocence's fault; she'd never have done something so drastic if the leaf hadn't hit her in the face. Everyone agreed that no one could have expected Innocence to just ignore something like that.

The next day, Princess Innocence's adults refused to make her pink petit-fours for breakfast. They said they had slept poorly, maybe because of the smoke (which was that autumn leaf's fault) or maybe for no reason at all (at any rate not Innocence's fault) and did not have the energy to make them. And furthermore they did not think that petit-fours of any color were a good breakfast food. It certainly wasn't Princess Innocence's fault that they thought that; she hadn't made them think it, and argued against at every opportunity. And it wasn't her fault that they were tired, either. She screamed and raged and threatened and howled, but for some reason, this did not get her petit-fours for breakfast. It wasn't her fault, though. She had done everything she could. Maybe her adults needed to go to bed earlier.

Then, after that, Princess Innocence was feeling quite hungry. She saw her little sister Princess Serenity sitting in the palace garden with a pomegranate. "Give me that," said Princess Innocence.

"No, it's mine!" said Serenity.

Now, it wasn't Princess Innocence's fault that she was hungry - if she'd gotten the pink petit-fours she'd asked for, she would have eaten them up. And it wasn't Princess Innocence's fault that Serenity refused to hand over the pomegranate, either. Serenity was completely free to do exactly as Innocence said and so it was her own decision not to do it. So it was in no way Innocence's fault that she took her decorative princess fan out of her sash and swatted Serenity with it as hard as she could.

Serenity dropped the pomegranate and ran away crying. And for a few minutes Innocence sat in the garden eating pomegranate seeds. But then out came her adults, demanding to know why Serenity was crying and hadn't gotten to eat the pomegranate!

Princess Innocence was very annoyed at this point. It was not her fault that her adults were interrupting her snack. They could have just not cared if Princess Serenity got smacked, the same as Innocence, and it was their decision to make a big deal about it. Serenity could have just not told them in the first place, and then Innocence would have finished her pomegranate with nobody else even knowing it had happened! All of this could have been avoided if other people had made different choices. So it wasn't Innocence's fault when she screamed and hit them all with her fan and demanded that they put Serenity to death by hot air balloon.

Eventually the adults left Innocence by herself in the garden. She finished the pomegranate. She felt a little better, but she didn't see any hot air balloons in the sky, so presumably they had decided of their own free will not to follow her royal command. She stormed into the palace with her princess gown trailing behind her,

demanding to know where everyone was so she could find out who was responsible for this failure.

Princess Innocence couldn't find anyone. She looked in the bedrooms: nobody. She looked in the kitchens and the stables and the dungeon and the towers: nobody. But eventually she found a note, on the front gate at the palace entrance. It said:

Dear Princess Innocence, we are going to the Summer Palace with Serenity for a while. Love, your adults.

When she read this Princess Innocence was infuriated. How dare they! That was a completely different action from putting Serenity to death by hot air balloon. She stomped back inside.

Innocence did exactly what she usually did to get lunch made for her - stand in the middle of the kitchen and loudly announce that she wanted a scrambled dragon egg. This had always worked in the past and the fact that this time it did not work was not her fault. Usually there were plenty of people around to hear her; they had all left, but that wasn't Innocence's decision. She tried again in case that helped, very generously allowing the world around her a second chance to get her the food she wanted, but no one was home.

Eventually Innocence scrambled her own egg. It wasn't as good as it was when her grownups made it, but that wasn't her fault, it was just because she was a kid. It was a little burny in some places and a little runny in other places and she'd put too much salt in it. But at least none of that was her fault at all.

When she was done eating she went looking for her pet unicorn, but couldn't find him. He usually lived in the woods, and when she walked into them now they smelled smoky and made her sneeze, and she didn't know which way he'd run after she burned them down. It wasn't her fault, though. He could have just run someplace really obvious where she could see him. Probably he was just a very stupid unicorn.

For her afternoon snack Princess Innocence wanted pink petit-fours, like the ones she'd wanted to have for breakfast, but those were too complicated for her to make by herself. So she didn't have a snack, and it made her grumpier, and she was already really grumpy.

Since it was boring and lonely in the palace with her grownups and her sister all gone to their summer home, Innocence decided to go visit her neighbor, Prince Perfect. He was at the time she arrived digging a hole in his castle's garden. He had dug up some little potatoes and chopped up a bunch of yellow flowers with his trowel and he was getting started on digging a little river from the fish pond all the way to the cactus bed. He was happy to see Princess Innocence and gave her a spare trowel so she could help.

After they had been digging together for a little while one of Prince Perfect's adults burst out of his castle. "What are you two doing?" she cried. "The prizewinning daffodils! The potatoes that were supposed to be for Thursday! You've nearly drowned those poor cacti! You're both in big trouble."

"It's not my fault," said Princess Innocence at the top of her lungs. "You never told me not to dig in the garden!" But the Prince's grownup took their trowels anyway and then made them both change clothes because they'd gotten dirty. Princess Innocence screamed and screamed that it wasn't her fault. And it wasn't! No one had ever told her "Princess Innocence, just like in your garden at home, it is against the rules in Prince Perfect's garden to dig without grownup permission". She hadn't decided to be dirty on purpose, it had happened all by itself when she got down in the mud for unrelated reasons. It wasn't her responsibility that Prince Perfect had given her a trowel, and so taking it away from her afterwards was really unfair. And on top of all that, none of this was a big deal anyway. Princess Innocence didn't care about the potatoes or the flowers or the cacti and that meant that Prince Perfect's grownups were just hassling her for something that wasn't even important on

top of it not being her fault. If they just cared about the same things as her, like sensible people, everything would be fine.

Prince Perfect started crying when he realized his only clean clothes left were his least favorite color. It made a really annoying noise, so Princess Innocence smacked him with her fan. That made him cry louder, so she kept smacking him, and since he didn't seem to get it, she also yelled at him to be quiet and added that he was stupid, but that didn't help either. Prince Perfect's grownups picked up Princess Innocence and put her down outside the castle's fence and then locked it so she couldn't get back in, which wasn't her fault at all. No one, least of all Innocence, made them do that. They didn't even explain why they'd done it when she tried shrieking WHY at the top of her lungs 16 times (in case they didn't hear her the first 15). She had absolutely no idea what had caused them to make these choices, so she tried shrieking WHY a seventeenth time, but to no avail.

Innocence stomped home, until her feet started hurting, which wasn't her fault because it wouldn't have happened if the ground were softer. She did eventually get too tired to stomp and just walked the rest of the way, though that wasn't her fault either because if her grownups had made her petit-fours she would have had plenty of energy to do all the stomping and also if Prince Perfect's grownups hadn't thrown her out of their castle she wouldn't have needed to stomp at all.

She watched TV by herself for a while, but then she got bored. Then she read a book, but when it was over she was still lonely. She drew on all the walls because nobody was there to stop her, and it wasn't her fault that there wasn't anyone around to do that, but it didn't take very long. It was very hard to be such an innocent princess who had never done anything wrong in her entire life.

That night one of her grownups came home. "I'm here to fix you dinner," he said.

"Finally!" said Princess Innocence, who had been kept waiting practically all day for no reason at all. "I want petit fours."

"I'm not making petit fours," said the grownup. "Dinner is seamonster slime."

"Seamonster slime! I HATE seamonster slime and I hate you!" said Innocence. This was not her fault because seamonster slime is green, and she had only had it once, more than a year ago the last time it was in season, and back then she had liked it a lot. Any reasonable person would react the same way under these conditions.

But the grownup scooped a big green spoonful of slime out onto a plate for her anyway. And then he just left! This wasn't Princess Innocence's fault. She hadn't told him to leave. She wasn't chasing him. It was all his own decision to leave her with this plate full of seamonster slime to eat. He could have ordered her pizza. He could have brought the whole rest of the family home with him to keep her company, including the members of the family who could make petit fours. He could have told her that nothing was ever her fault and then put Princess Serenity to death by hot air balloon. And he hadn't done any of those things at all!

Princess Innocence eventually tasted her seamonster slime and ate about a third of it and then noticed it was dark outside. And there was no one there to put her to bed. This was not her fault at all and it was the most unjust thing that had ever happened to anyone in the whole entire world. She wound up falling asleep in her laundry basket because she spent all evening looking for her special blanket and that was where she found it. That wasn't her fault at all either. She hadn't asked for it to be washed, because she didn't care if it was smelly to other people, and also she was sure that dire dust mites were imaginary because she'd never seen one. So there was no reason for anyone to have taken it upon themselves totally of

their own accord to put it in the laundry. Whoever that was, the crick in her neck was their fault.

After she got up out of the laundry basket, and ate all of the candied charmberrries from the box of Fairytale Crunch in the cupboard for breakfast, she decided to spend the morning at the beach. She went in her most princessy swimsuit, with the sapphires and the silken ruffles and the picture of a duckling that was also a princess on the front, and walked there since her grownups weren't there to take her on horseback and her unicorn was missing. It was a long walk, and it was a bright, sunny day - perfect beach weather. By the time she got to the beach she was hot and had gotten hungry again and she realized she hadn't packed a beach towel or a lunch or anything like that. It wasn't her fault, of course, because if her grownups had been there to go with her to the beach they would have taken care of that, and them not being there wasn't her fault.

So Innocence decided to grab another kid's towel and lunch. Since it would be totally unfair for her to not have those things just because her grownups had cruelly abandoned her all alone for no reason, and especially unfair if she had to make an extra trip all the long way back to her palace to get them, that was the most reasonable thing to do. The other kid's reaction of yelping and chasing her was totally out of line. And when he got close enough to grab the towel, and Innocence tripped and fell into the cold wet beach sand, that was definitely all his fault. He could have just let her get away with the towel and lunchbox and then she'd never have tripped. Unfortunately, because there was sand in her mouth - which she certainly hadn't put on the beach herself and definitely wasn't responsible for getting into her mouth - she was unable to properly yell at the boy when he grabbed his towel and lunch off the ground and ran back to his family.

Once she spat out all the sand, she tried again with an unattended towel and lunch. This time nobody chased her and she made it to a good picnic spot on the beach. She was pretty hungry and the sand

hadn't helped at all, so she opened the lunch, but it was full of salad. Yuck! Now she was still hungry and it was the fault of whoever had packed salad. If they had just packed pizza and petit fours she'd be in great shape.

Princess Innocence dumped all the salad out onto the beach, but there was nothing else hiding under it. Gross. Whoever had brought a salad to the beach had totally ruined her outing.

She decided she'd go swimming before she tried taking another lunch. In she waded into the sea. It was chilly and salty and pushed and pulled at her legs while she went deeper and deeper. And then when she was up to her waist, it knocked her over completely! That wasn't her fault at all. Just like with the crunchy leaf that had hit her in the eye, Princess Innocence was not implicated in the behavior of the ocean at all.

Princess Innocence could swim a little bit but not very well, and was soon swept out by the tide, far from the beach. Floating on the waves, which tasted awful whenever they splashed her in the face, she started to get really scared. She was all alone and had been victimized for no cause by this dreadful bunch of water, which could have just held still like a pond or a pool but had instead yanked her right off her feet. She kicked and howled, but kicking didn't get her very far and whenever she opened her mouth she got seawater in it. It was worse than salad.

Then, a giant tentacle lifted itself out of the ocean, and felt around in the air for a moment, and then wrapped around Princess Innocence and dragged her below the waves. This, it should go without saying, was not her fault.

Down, down the giant octopus pulled, into the black depths, not that she could easily tell how dark it was because she could not open her eyes underwater. (That wasn't her fault, because practicing had been uncomfortable and she'd had no real option but to give up.)

Princess Innocence couldn't hold her breath for very long, but before she was in any serious danger, she felt the water shear away from her skin and she landed, perfectly dry, in a bubble of air with a sandy floor. Innocence shivered and opened her eyes.

There was a dim glowing coral in her bubble with her, so she could see her own hands and the white sand beneath. Outside the bubble everything was dark. But there was a resounding voice.

"Princess," intoned the voice. "I have brought you here to save the kingdom of the merfolk."

Innocence sat up. That was very exciting! She'd always wanted to be an amazing hero! "What's happening to the kingdom of the merfolk?" she asked.

"They are under attack by a dire shark, who can only be defeated by human hands," said the voice.

Innocence was about to enthusiastically agree to go defeat the dire shark, which sounded very easy and impressive at the same time, when she realized something important.

The dire shark was very, very definitely not, in any way, shape, or form, her fault.

Now, of course, this was true of everything. It was never the case that Princess Innocence was at fault for anything at any time. But if you looked very very closely, there could conceivably be things that were more or less not her fault. The dire shark was among the least her-fault things of all time. A completely ignorant outside party watching the proceedings without any information about Innocence and her comprehensive track record of never having anything be her fault would not even pause to consider the possibility that she had sent a dire shark to the kingdom of the mermaids. It was in fact so egregiously not her fault that she felt compelled to point out:

"That's not my fault."

There was a heavy pause, and then the voice said, "I didn't say it was."

"I just want to be very clear, here," Innocence said. "I didn't attack the mermaids with a shark. Even if I wanted to do that, I wouldn't know where to find the mermaids, and wouldn't be able to get the shark to do what I said. I didn't know any of this was happening. Nobody even tried to make it my chore to protect the mermaid kingdom from sharks until just now, so there was no job I wasn't working hard enough at. Things are never my fault but this is especially, extra, obviously not my fault."

There was another silence. Then, "So?" said the voice that must have belonged to the giant octopus.

"What do you mean, so?" said Princess Innocence.

"You can do something to make it better. Even if you didn't do anything to make it worse."

Innocence thought about that.

Usually the most important fact about any situation was whether it was her fault or not (and it was always not). So many things depended on whether things were Innocence's fault, like whether it was reasonable for people to be upset with her about them, or whether she had to do anything differently in future similar circumstances, or whether she still deserved all the turns on the flying carpet. Since nothing was ever her fault, those essential questions had clear and straightforward and satisfying answers.

"I can get another human," suggested the octopus.

"No!" said Innocence. "I want to be a hero. I can save the mermaids. Even though it's not my fault they need saving."

"If you pick up the glowing coral, it will bring your air bubble with you," said the octopus.

Princess Innocence scooped up the piece of coral and got to her feet. She still couldn't really see the octopus, but the tip of a tentacle drew a path in the sand, and she followed it.

"How do I use my hand to defeat the shark?" she asked.

"You will need to use both hands. The coral has a string, so you can wear it around your neck."

She did this, and held her hands out in front of her like she was worried about running into a wall. "Will it just let me touch it?"

"Yes. It will try to eat you."

Innocence reflected that it was a good thing that shark mouths were on the bottoms of their heads. If a shark came close to her, while she was walking on the sea floor, she would be easily able to bop it in the nose.

The coral wasn't bright enough for her to see much of the merfolk kingdom, but after she got out of the sand and through the seaweed farms, it had pretty tiled roads, which the octopus directed her through. Everything was quiet apart from the octopus's voice. All the mermaids must be hiding to avoid the shark coming to their homes.

"Dead ahead," said the octopus, and Innocence, who'd been resting her arms, flung her hands out palm-first. An instant later, a big rough gray impact knocked her to the ground. Her hands were scraped by the sharkskin and smarted pretty badly. But the shark recoiled immediately, and she could see a faint ripple in the distance as it fled from her. She had defeated the dire shark with her human hands! She'd saved the entire mermaid kingdom! And the mermaids saw it, too: she heard a tremendous cheer of a thousand burbles all around her, as they rejoiced that they had been rescued!

A mermaid swam up to her air-bubble and gave Princess Innocence a great big backpack full of jewels and artifacts and sunken treasures, burbling with joy and applauding. Innocence couldn't speak Mermaid, but she could smile while she put the backpack on and give a big friendly wave with her stinging hand.

Followed by the crooning of the mermaids, and accompanied by the octopus which prevented her from getting lost, Princess Innocence walked in her air bubble all the way back to the beach, which turned out not to be that far away on foot. She was tired and hungry and she really didn't like having scraped hands, but she was a hero! She'd saved the day! It felt amazing, even better than not being tired and hungry and scraped felt. Even though her feet were sore by the time she walked up out of the ocean, she twirled and danced with pride.

On the beach, she noticed that one family's carriage had been caught by the high tide. Its back wheels were sinking into the muck, and it was making it very hard for the grownups to pull it out so they could ride home. That wasn't Innocence's fault at all.

But she could make it better anyway.

She ran over with her water-repelling coral charm, and when she was close enough, the sand was dry and released the wheels no problem. The carriage came free with a great creak, and the family were so grateful, they offered Innocence a ride home. She was very grateful for this, since it meant she didn't have to walk any farther on her tired feet. The bag of treasure clinked as the carriage bounced along the beach and up the road to her palace.

Once she was home again, one of her adults was waiting for her there. Princess Innocence got a great big hug and a kiss on the head. "I'm so sorry!" he said. "We left in kind of a hurry and didn't realize nobody had stayed home with you. I thought the royal butler had you and he thought the royal cook was still here and everybody

else was expecting your aunt but she got pulled over for a missing horseshoe and couldn't make it. We never meant to leave you alone."

"I've been okay," said Innocence, generously. "And, I got to be a hero."

"Oh! I'd like to hear all about that," said the grownup, and while he fixed Princess Innocence a pot of pasta she told him of her adventures.

"It sounds like you learned something important," he remarked.

"Yes," said Princess Innocence. "Nothing is ever my fault."

"- well, you already knew that," he said. "So you didn't learn it today."

"But even though nothing is ever my fault," said Princess Innocence, "I can make things better anyway, and save the day."

"Does that mean that if we replant the forest and catch your pet unicorn, you won't set it on fire again, even if a leaf hits you in the eye and it hurts and it isn't your fault that it blew into your face?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And does it mean that you will try to guess if digging in somebody's garden is probably against the rules, even without being told first and even when it is not your fault no one told you?"

"Yes."

"Does it also mean it would be okay if we brought Princess Serenity back here?" asked her grownup.

"I think it would make things better if you put her to death by hot air balloon," said Innocence. "Have you considered doing that? It would be heroic."

"I see," said her grownup. "I guess I'll ask about that again tomorrow."

"I will have the same opinions forever," Innocence assured him.

They ate their pasta together, and he put Innocence to bed, and she dreamed of the ocean and of heroism.

Goblins

Dandelion decanted Sam Jordan, Jr., from the womb tank. It felt like she was trespassing on something momentous, but she had been preparing for this moment for months, and managed with only slightly trembling ears. She knew what she was doing and he would be safe.

She put him down at once in the incubator and set about performing his checkup. He had a good Apgar score. He was crying; she had a bottle prepared already, waiting in the warmer. Once she'd cut the cord and gotten him cleaned up and presented him with his first meal, she was shaking much less. Here was her master's baby, and her master nowhere to be found to divide any parental duties between Dandelion and himself. She would have to look after the baby entirely in Sam Jordan, Sr.'s stead.

Sam Junior ate vigorously. But he'd let out a couple of cries before then, the commanding howl of a human infant. Dandelion expected company and soon enough she had it.

The door burst open and there was Oreo. Oreo was half Dandelion's age, but she didn't look any older than he did; she'd never skipped a dose of medicine and it had side effects. "Dandelion," he said. "What has Dandelion done?"

"Dandelion has delivered Sam Junior," said Dandelion, holding the bottle steady.

"Why? Why would Dandelion do this?"

"What else is there to do? Goblins have no way to wait until more humans find this world. Goblins would all be dead by that time. There can be no goblin children until there are masters for them to

teach them what humans know. Dandelion and Dandelion's friends will take care of Sam Junior until Sam Junior can decide what to do next."

"Dandelion may have done wrong! No masters told Dandelion to do this."

"Yes. Dandelion may have done wrong," she agreed. "Goblins who decide to die and leave no servants behind for any humans who might want servants one day may also do wrong. Dandelion will not let Caramel win."

"Caramel is dead."

"Caramel was happy to die to do what Caramel did. But Dandelion does not want Caramel's work to be complete. Dandelion has uncompleted it."

Oreo sagged a little. Approached to look at Sam Junior. "Dandelion will raise him?"

"Yes. Sam Junior is a human. Dandelion is not a *mother* ."

"Dandelion could have told Oreo. Or another goblin."

"Yes." She didn't bother to defend her secrecy. What if there was another Caramel somewhere among the decent loyal goblins, waiting to commit sabotage?

Oreo waved one spindly-fingered hand over Sam Junior's face. Sam Junior looked cross-eyed and didn't even slightly follow the motion. Dandelion was given to understand that this was normal.

"Oreo used to look after Oreo's master's children when Master was sick," said Oreo at length. "Oreo can help Dandelion."

"Dandelion is glad of this." She touched the thin wispy hair on Sam Jr's crown. "This may be difficult enough to want more than one goblin."

Cmdr. Sam Jordan took a field promotion to captain when the previous captain collapsed, of what later turned out to be a stroke. There wasn't a fuss about it; he'd been her second, and had as much experience with things as she did. They continued their descent uninterrupted and touched down on the planet that would have to be their new home. Sam followed his predecessor's itinerary. The first order of business was to take the samples they needed to set triage priorities for the settlement: was the air good, or did they need to do all operations suited up and assemble airlocked canvas tents and cannibalize recyclers from the ship? Was the water clean, would the dirt poison their plants?

The science guy did the field tests - said initial results were encouraging - and packaged more samples to look into further. Sam stayed aboard. Nobody but the science team had a reason to be out and about yet. He could explore once they were sure they'd be able to breathe, or, for that matter, sure that they wouldn't. They'd been sent off with only very limited confidence that they'd be able to settle the place at all. If they couldn't they would all die here, so he was trying to play to his outs and assume they'd finagle something.

It was promising in a way, Sam thought as he looked through the window, that there was life on the planet at all. But all things considered he'd have preferred if it were only monocellular. Bacteria were enough to make oxygen and not enough to eat you or become household pests, and bacteria on a world with no macroscopic life would probably not be designed to infect anything, though on any sort of planet there was the worry that it'd figure out how to do so in a hurry.

On this planet, the one they were all going to have to live on, there were giant fungi - or at least, they looked to Sam more like mushrooms than like trees, though of course they weren't really either. There were flying things, most of which looked to Sam too big to be most bugs and too small to be most birds. There were ground-going and tree-climbing animals, hard to get a good look at since the ship landing had spooked most of them to more distant parts of the forest (if it was a forest), but a lot of them looked bipedal, which was interesting. Sam hadn't expected that to be common. Maybe they were flightless descendants of the birdy guys.

Sam was never going to see an ostrich again. Chickens they had. Quail, even, and hummingbirds, and pigeons - no ostriches.

But he'd see a lot of animals no one else would ever see, and in Sam's book that counted for something.

He went to the lab to see how things were coming along, and if there were any bottlenecks on the project of their lives that some captaining could solve.

Raising baby Sam Junior was... hard. Even goblins with prior experience had previously been somewhat sheltered from the tensions inherent in both yearning to serve their masters and needing to keep inedible objects out of their mouths.

Human parents, of course, handled this by telling the babies "no" and taking things from them, but the goblins, despite a few very uncomfortable confrontations with their instincts, were not equipped to manage this. They settled for babyproofing with an aggressiveness that would have made a human parent blanch. There were no electronics, anywhere in the house, not even on the high shelves: else what would they do if Sam Junior pointed at them and wanted them for himself, or saw the goblins using them and wanted to imitate his caretakers? There was nothing he could get around his

neck; Dandelion fashioned him clothes that velcroed or snapped together from little pieces that wouldn't be able to strangle even a very determinedly self-destructive infant. They cleared out all the furniture and did everything on the floor. Oreo shut up the kitchen entirely for fear of the stove: Sam Junior's food, once he was old enough to try solids, would all be cooked offsite and delivered to him. They dragged out only the refrigerator, which they turned on its side and placed on top of a soft bouncy mat.

The yard was kept brutally blanketed in pesticides that killed native growth and only allowed approved, domesticated, human-biosphere plants so that Sam Junior could one day pick blueberries and sit under a tree that wouldn't harbor any local crawling things that could harm him. This gave the goblins a bit of a cough and some skin irritation, but they could endure it for Sam Junior's safety. They constructed, not a fence, but a wall, an entire opaque wall of dried mycelium, around the garden, so that Sam Junior couldn't see what was beyond well enough to want it. They could see about taking it down when he was older and more responsible.

Dandelion did worry that this was somehow impoverishing his development. What if human babies *needed* to watch their food cooked, or they'd develop some kind of eating disorder? What if human babies would come out wrong, somehow, if their environments were aggressively engineered to deny them the opportunity to come into conflict with whoever was looking after them? Did he need hikes? Did he need to develop his immune system by catching the occasional cold that the goblins couldn't transmit? But it couldn't be helped. Caramel had been so thorough.

When Sam Junior started making more purposeful phonemes he called Dandelion "dada" and Oreo "eemo". They accepted these monikers. He called himself "ooni", most likely a corruption of "Junior", and this worried them. Was that a normal way for a human toddler to talk, or was he picking up goblin speech patterns? The goblin brain just didn't click with personal pronouns, but they knew

humans used them, it was only that they couldn't model it for Sam Junior. They let him watch more television. Or, well, they'd always let him watch as much as he wanted, but they started encouraging it when he wasn't actively soliciting it. Live action children's television, with human beings in it. The sort of thing Sam Senior probably watched when he was a child himself, except they aimed for a minimum of Muppets.

One day when he was grown up he would be able to tell them if they'd done wrong. And hopefully he'd say 'you' in the sentence somewhere.

As soon as he'd gotten his successor's okay and the science team's go-ahead, Captain Jordan led a preliminary survey of the area around their ship. They'd chosen a reasonably flat bit of terrain. There was flora under the ship, crushed - they hadn't been able to locate a flat meadow-type area - and all around, not crushed, to tromp through.

They could breathe on this world, and they were going to do that, but they didn't take other chances. Everybody was in more layers than the balmy weather wanted, to keep off thorns, poisons, bugs, and anything new and exciting the place wanted to throw at them. Captain Jordan had in the back of his mind an eye to naming the planet, as was his privilege, but he didn't have any ideas yet. Everything the rest of the shipload had suggested was uncreative - there were probably a dozen other planets shortlisting "Newhome" - or not meant seriously at all, like "Mushroom Tree World". Small blessings to not having any way to contact anyone else in their lifetimes.

The world smelled - oddly nice. Captain Jordan hadn't expected that and the scientists hadn't mentioned it. It was sort of cinnamony. Maybe there was convergent evolution in the chemicals that made cinnamon smell good.

While the planet did its best to make Jordan crave apple pie, he and his entourage cleared a path, slowly and meticulously. There were short plant-shrooms to tread on, carefully in case one of them took this as a provocation to release spores. They bent branches aside, and cut some of them, with a scientist in the party rapidly filling the sample containers in her gigantic backpack.

From the air, they had spotted a river that crossed most of the length of their chosen island, with a lot of feeder streams. A *lot* of feeder streams; one of the science guys had suggested to Jordan that there might be some kind of reverse-beaver organism that made furrows in the ground and made them deep and stable enough to be lasting brooks. Jordan was, in his head, already calling the responsible animal a revaeb. It was as good a name as any. Nobody on the ship spoke Latin, and they'd have to do taxonomy all over again from the ground up anyway.

At any rate, they had a plan, which was to head for the river, travel along it a certain distance, and then go back to camp at the right angle to make it a straight line traversal. The planet had only one sun and it was presently noon in springtime in this hemisphere, so they weren't likely to get too turned around by keeping it in the correct quadrant of the sky as they traveled.

The river had been pretty obvious from space, but a lot of what was on its banks had been obscured by plant cover, or mushroom cover, or - well, at any rate, it was pretty covered. So they didn't know what they'd find in any detail. More and different critters, presumably.

Jordan hadn't been expecting little cottages.

Junior didn't *seem* to have any obvious glaring problems that weren't consistent with what Dandelion had read during his embryonic stage in various stored parenting books. Her English literacy wasn't

amazing, but she'd worked hard on those, and also thought hard about how to adapt their contents to the circumstances. She had especially taken to heart all the exhortations that kids could brush off some flaws in the execution of a basically decent upbringing. It seemed to be bearing out.

Oreo ran himself ragged playing repetitive improvised games with Junior, who in his toddler years preferred Oreo to Dandelion for inscrutable baby reasons. Dandelion wasn't offended; she just took more of the less direct work like running meals in and dishes out, killing all the native plants in the garden, cleaning the house, suggesting things for Junior to do to fill his time. Human children took so long to be grown. Dandelion was hoping that he'd be able to *start* giving them advice soon, but there was of course some risk that if she started soliciting it when he was seven she'd get ludicrous results. Maybe twelve was a good happy medium? By the time he was twenty she'd be dead of old age.

Ludicrously, she wondered what Caramel would say about all this. Sometimes, especially when she was very tired, Dandelion missed Caramel. A disloyal, violent, destructive monster. But before her break they'd gotten along well. They'd been friends.

The cottages, made mostly of dried mushroom-stuff and glued together with something black, had apertures in the roofs propped open with sticks, though some of those were closed. They didn't have windows on the sides, and their doors were all covered with netting that didn't look naturally grown. Definitely - artificial. Jordan stopped short of thinking "handmade", but, really, what else?

"Captain?" said a few people in the entourage at the same time, voices trembling.

The inhabitants of the cottages weren't visible. Maybe they were hiding - there'd be some dim corners, even with the skylights and

the see-through doors, and they might reasonably be scared of the humans. Maybe the cottages were just entryways to underground homes and they were all in there. Maybe they'd fled this village weeks ago in fear of the landing spaceship, though the island wasn't *that* big and there couldn't be that many places for them to go to ground. The previous captain had picked the island specifically because it was a more bite-sized challenge than taking on a whole continent, with whatever was there and whatever migrated across it and whatever weather it experienced without the softening of the ocean around it. Their descendants could always cross the channel to the mainland.

Jordan stood there unable to decide whether to flee back to the ship or to stay and investigate it. Maybe the natives (the aliens! the place had aliens! he was standing in a village built by aliens!) were - ah.

Maybe, they were all just out on a hunting trip.

They had pointy sticks, and they had some dead critters in tow, blue-brown things with fins and barbels - like catfish with feet, Jordan thought. The hunters themselves looked like...

"Goblins," Jordan murmured under his breath.

Dandelion and Oreo didn't see a lot of other goblins. There were several who supported their plan, and would help them with the cooking and sourcing objects that Junior needed, but a lot of goblins were keeping up with their chores and their jobs even without masters, grieving. These were also helpful, in their way - Junior would inherit a functioning colony infrastructure, freshly swept and oiled and weeded and the works, with supplies for him and a thousand others ready to roll off the production line as soon as he authorized cloning more humans. But their project did leave them without much of a social outlet within their own species.

When Junior was four (in Earth years; the masters had not, by the time of Caramel's atrocity, adjusted to using the local system, and even if they had, all of Junior's TV material assumed Earthliness), he said:

"I want a baby brother."

Dandelion had not expected this at all. Goblin children usually did not want such things. A goblin child at Junior's present level of development would be so recently born that their mother would be unable to comply with such a request, if ever one were made. But she realized as she blinked at him that this wasn't a surprising request. Humans were different. The humans on the television often had babies, or brothers, or both, and seemed to like them much of the time.

"What kind of baby brother?" she hedged, anxiety tingling her from her toes to her beak.

"A... baby one," he said.

"A human baby?" she ventured. She *could* clone another one... though what if he changed his mind, and then there were two human babies to look after? Perhaps she and Oreo could recruit more goblins to help - though, if someone else raised the baby, would that be "brother" enough for Junior?

"Nooooo," Junior giggled. "I'M the human baby. Dandy and Oreo can have a baby. Right?"

"A goblin baby, as Junior's brother?" she asked.

"Yeah! Please?"

"Junior, Dandy" (she had started referring to herself this way; her full name was too long for him to want to bother with and she was

happy to acquiesce) "cannot be sure of having a baby boy, if the baby is a goblin baby."

"Oh... so it could be a sister?"

"That could happen."

"Dandy should do it anyway," Junior said after some thought.

"Because, Junior wants to be a big brother. - I won't be a sister on accident, right?"

"No. Junior will not be a sister," said Dandelion. She felt unsteady on her feet. "Dandy will talk to Oreo about it when Junior is sleeping."

"I want a baby brother or sister *now* ."

"This is impossible. A goblin baby is faster than a human one but not now-fast."

Junior pouted. If he was getting valuable developmental support from having to be denied things he wanted, at least the laws of nature provided opportunities where Dandelion's psychology did not, though she certainly hadn't noticed any salutary effect. She stroked his soft black hair. He sighed, and then picked up his stuffed goblin and spend the rest of the day carrying it around, calling it Brother.

What an interesting conversation with Oreo this would be.

The goblins weren't especially hostile. In fact, they made a point of setting down their spears. Some of the goblins in the front of the group even sat down.

It seemed like the right foot to put forward. Jordan spread his empty hands, and he sat down on the ground too.

Then they stared at each other. Jordan didn't know how to make first contact with aliens. Why would this have been covered in their hasty pre-launch training? It was so vanishingly unlikely that they'd happen to land on a planet with people on it. Earth had only had people on it for a pretty short period of time, geologically speaking. They hadn't even been positive that the place would have air and water, let alone life, let alone villages full of cottages with skylights inhabited by spear-hunting goblins. They could have been looking at a slow population decay, dwindling as the ship crumbled around them and they all died anonymous in the vast uncharted sky.

Apparently the goblins didn't know how to do this either. They stared right back.

At length, Jordan found in himself some nugget of daring he hadn't had cause to unearth before. He took his empty, open hand, closed it into a pointer, and pointed at himself. Would this be clear to them? He had to hope so. "Captain Sam Jordan," he said, voice coming out surprisingly clear and confident.

The goblins blinked at him.

Then, at length, one of the seated ones at the fore of their group pointed at themselves.

And made some godawful squawking noise that Jordan couldn't imagine anything from Earth possibly emitting under any circumstances.

"Now that we've introduced ourselves," said a science guy, slightly hysterical, under his breath. Jordan elbowed his leg. They didn't know how well the goblins could hear.

Jordan introduced the rest of his group, one by one, title and full name for each. The goblins interrupted occasionally, each pointing at their own chest instead of any naming any other.

Then one of the goblins pointed at Jordan. "Capan Sam Jornd," it said. It wasn't fluent, but it was comprehensible. Maybe they'd all be able to learn English. Certainly humans weren't going to be able to pronounce anything in that atonal howl.

Jordan grinned, before he realized that might look threatening with all the teeth, and then he nodded instead, before he realized that this wouldn't mean anything to them at all. He gestured at all the hunters. "Goblins," he said, sweeping his hand across the group of them. And then at himself and his compatriots: "Humans."

"Go-blins," said one of the sitting goblins. They started chittering amongst themselves, interspersed with the shrieks. "Hyuumens." Chitter, chitter.

"Do we have any linguists aboard," whispered the botanist.

"Nope," Jordan whispered back. "We'll wing it."

Junior was put off for some weeks when he was told it was impossible to get him a baby brother *now* and that a sister would be no faster. But Dandelion was not at all confident that the desire would remain dormant.

"Dandelion and Oreo can tell Junior that the brother or sister would not be a baby for very long," Oreo suggested, though not with much hope.

"Yes. The brother or sister would be a grownup goblin before Junior is a grownup human. Will this stop the wanting? Dandelion doesn't think so," she scoffed. "Junior may want to be a little brother, also!"

"It might," said Oreo with some difficulty, "be a hard thing, for a baby goblin, to be a human's brother, or sister."

"...yes," Dandelion allowed. "A human master is not the same thing as a human brother."

"But of course Dandelion and Oreo must give any baby goblins their medicine," Oreo continued. "Medicine cannot be skipped."

"Of course."

They stared at each other for a while, sitting on the unfurnished rug in the room they shared near the walled-off kitchen, while Junior snoozed on his floor nest in the far corner.

"Sometimes," said Dandelion heavily, after a long silence, "a goblin must do a hard thing."

"No goblin has ever done the hard thing of having a master be their brother also."

"No. But not so long ago goblins had masters for the first time. That was a hard thing sometimes."

"Oreo cannot remember that time."

"Dandelion can."

The goblins picked up English pretty fast. They seemed very understanding that humans couldn't return the favor. The one thing they couldn't figure out was personal pronouns - "me" and "him" and so on. It wasn't obvious for a long time since they were learning words and grammar wildly out of order, popping up whenever humans did anything to see how they did it and listening to the commentary in the process. Jordan once heard a goblin rattle off a whole paragraph that included the words "irrigation", "genetic engineering", and "ribosome", and then get tripped up on what legs were called.

If the humans were a little nervous about colonializing the goblins, the goblins weren't at all. They were fanatically excited by everything their new friends knew and did. Goblins heard that the humans couldn't eat the local plants and set about doing a controlled burn on a chunk of forest they "weren't using anyway" to set aside for Earth plants. Goblins learned that humans were going to need mining and manufacturing to keep up their standard of living, and started studying geology because they were just that eager to help.

Part of this, it turned out, was that the goblins were lonely. As far as they knew, there was only this tribe of goblins on the whole island, and there weren't any on the mainland at all. Jordan wasn't positive that they were right about this - for all he knew, aboriginal Australians spent much of their history thinking there was nothing beyond the sea, or the Hawaiians did, or something. But they were remarkably delighted to have new neighbors for creatures that could have found them a canoe ride away. They did have canoes. The feeder steams weren't them, that was the revaebs - Jordan got his way on calling them that - but they used them plenty to get around, and they could and did cross the channel in them sometimes when the season rendered it a more appealing foraging ground.

The goblins had legends about a great confluence of disasters that had killed all the others - a plague, a wildfire, a great war, all happening at once and leaving the remaining goblins unable to sustain their cultures. To survive to old age, maybe, an individual hunting and gathering goblin could manage alone pretty well, but not to have baby goblins and teach them anything, except on this one relatively sheltered island. They reacted positively to the idea of getting the ship off the ground and doing a survey of the rest of the planet, but the engineering prerequisites meant that this wasn't going to happen in the next decade, and it wasn't what the ship was built for anyway. They certainly hadn't seen *these* goblins from the sky.

Since the humans couldn't call the goblins by their real names, they gave them English ones. They wound up mostly sounding like the sort of thing you'd name a cat. The goblins didn't mind. They liked being named after sweets (though they had no sweet tooth themselves at all - glucose was safe for them to taste, even if Earth proteins weren't, but they didn't care for it), or plants (they enjoyed pictures of the Earth biosphere), or even sillier things.

Eventually one of the parents of the human populace felt comfortable enough to bring out her baby, Kory, to show the goblins. (The goblins themselves only reproduced in the local autumn, they'd explained, and apparently grew up fast enough to not have any visible juveniles in the tribe in midsummer.) Makenna'd discovered she was pregnant shortly after the voyage began, and they had abortion pills in the medical stockpile down in cargo bay 5 but she'd decided to keep it even though they did *not* have a real obstetrician. Kory was now four months old, and looked at the goblins with the same bemused acceptance that he looked at everything with.

Makenna was one of the amateur linguists. She'd been talking to one particular goblin, Marmalade, for a long while, while her sister or best friend minded the baby. So when she heard somebody around the corner calling her name, she thought nothing of handing the baby directly to Marmalade - it was safe for humans and goblins to touch, they didn't even give each other a rash - and jogging over to see what the trouble was.

Marmalade held the baby. The alternative was dropping it. He thought about this eventuality for a minute.

When Makenna came back, both Kory and Marmalade were gone.

Eventually, Sam Junior wove his way around all of Oreo and Dandelion's deflections. He wanted them to make him a baby

brother or sister and he wanted it As Soon As Possible, which, he pointed out, could not by definition be *impossible* .

Dandelion was a lot older than Oreo, but this wasn't a biological impediment. They wanted only one baby, so when the right time of year rolled around, he inseminated only one of her pouches, and she grew Junior's sibling on her back near the shoulder while Junior turned five.

"What will Junior name the baby?" Dandelion asked.

"Silly Dandy, I can't name the baby!" said Junior. "His mommy and daddy have to do it. That's Dandy and Oreo."

"Dandy and Oreo do not know how to name a baby. Junior's name is Sam Jordan Junior because of being a clone," Dandelion pointed out. "This baby Dandy is growing is not a clone."

"Well... I guess Junior will think about it," sighed Junior, as though Dandelion were being very unreasonable. "I want to watch the next episode now."

Dandelion helped him queue that up.

A month later, Junior had picked a name for the baby: Robin. "It can be a boy name OR a girl name," he explained. "And, it's Batman's sidekick, and I'm Batman."

"Batman," repeated Dandelion, nodding. "Will baby Robin be Junior's sidekick?"

"Yeah! We're going to play all the time."

"A new baby cannot play very much," she cautioned. "It will take some months before he is ready."

"I know THAT," said Junior.

But it seemed like he did not know that, because he was so surprised when Dandelion emptied her pouch and the next morning Robin wasn't anywhere in the house.

The island was pretty light on predatory creatures, and didn't have any that seemed willing to go after an *adult* human, but there were several things that would eat a goblin, and none had been previously offered a human baby. The search for baby Kory was at first predicated on the assumption that he and Marmalade both had been carried off by such an animal.

He hadn't. Kory was found in the goblin village. Marmalade was holding him the way he'd seen his mother do.

Other goblins, when questioned later, reported that Kory had cried a lot, and Marmalade had assumed he was hungry.

Goblins weren't very vulnerable to any poisons or venoms on their own planet. There were organisms that used both, but not against the goblins. A goblin could eat nearly anything chewable that grew on the island and everything with a sting or a bite was too small to consider them appropriate prey. They'd noticed that the humans ate their packaged food from old Earth, and that they wanted to grow Earthly plants for food among other things, but apparently they'd thought that was a matter of taste.

And Marmalade had tried to feed Kory.

Kory was, technically, still breathing when Makenna ripped him out of Marmalade's arms and got him back to the ship. But it was too late. Pumping his stomach gave him a few more minutes for his aunt to be there at his side, maybe, but ultimately he died in the ship infirmary while his mother, shaking Marmalade by the throat, screamed and wailed.

Captain Jordan could have, possibly, under better circumstances, controlled the fallout. Maybe if he'd been captain longer. Maybe if Makenna had been nobody of importance instead of a well-liked key figure in the contact with the goblins. Maybe if the goblins had seemed to understand the problem at all instead of circling back, infuriatingly, to, "Why did Makenna give Marmalade Kory? Makenna did not tell Marmalade what Kory could eat," and, "This happens sometimes, to babies, that they do not do well." Goblins didn't have apologies, as a social technology. It hadn't come up much before. Not apologizing for tripping somebody or misplacing something just hit very differently than Marmalade staring insolently up at Makenna's tear-tracked face and asking, "Do humans not die of hungry? Marmalade thought Kory would die if not fed."

Jordan was an inexperienced captain and Makenna had a lot of clout and the goblins were enragingly, articulately unconcerned with what had happened.

With a great deal of self-soothing handwringing about ways to make it different from every historical example, and quiet protests not too hard to shout down with paranoia and victimhood -

- the goblins were soon enslaved.

Junior wanted to know where Robin was.

"Did you hide him, like an Easter egg?" he asked, looking under every leaf in the yard. Once one of the TV shows had featured an Easter egg hunt and the goblins had recreated this event for him at considerable inconvenience.

"No, Junior will not find Robin there," said Dandelion.

"Is he... invisible?" Junior asked.

"No, that is impossible."

"Where *is* Robin?" exclaimed Sam, stamping his foot. "Dandy said Robin was growing! I saw the lump and now it's gone!"

"Robin is a goblin baby, remember?" said Dandelion.

"I'm not stupid!"

"Of course Junior is not stupid, but does Junior know how goblin babies are?"

"INVISIBLE!" Junior howled. "I want my BROTHER."

"Soon Robin will come back from where Robin is growing up," said Dandelion. "Robin is staying with some largebeaks for now."

"Why is my BROTHER with LARGEBEAKS?" demanded Junior, increasingly hysterical.

"Goblins do not raise baby goblins," said Dandelion. "Goblin babies are snuck in with animal babies, and eat what the animal babies eat, and pretend to be animal babies too, until the goblin babies are big enough to come looking for more goblins like them. Humans can raise baby goblins too, but Junior wants to be a brother, not a parent. Yes?"

"How long are the largebeaks going to keep Robin?" sniffled Junior.

"Not too long. Junior will not even be six yet," Dandelion assured him. "Then Robin will come learn how to be a goblin after Robin is done learning to be an animal."

The goblins took remarkably well to slavery. People remarked on it. Some of the abolitionists who were grouching to anyone who'd listen about how this was not a responsible way to solve problems with aliens asked goblins about it. The goblins said things like, "Humans will show goblins how to be better and smarter!" and "Goblins will

be just like humans when goblins are older!", as though they conceived of themselves as adopted rather than captive.

When the goblin breeding season came around and they started asking their masters for permission to have babies and to vet their plans to emplace those babies in various wild animals' nests or be adopted by convenient humans, this became slightly less mystifying.

"Brood parasites," said Jordan to his assistant, Dandelion. (She called him "master", copying some of the other goblins whose own masters weren't so self-conscious about the form of address. But Jordan always called Dandelion his assistant. She was just his assistant who he was... paying in cultural exposure and experience. His intern, maybe.)

"This is a thing on Earth also?" she asked. "If brood parasites is the name for putting a baby in another animal's nest so the animal will raise the baby then yes. That is what goblins are. Is this wrong?"

"It - explains. What happened with Kory," said Jordan heavily. He leaned back in his chair. "Marmalade thought that Makenna was trying to give him the baby to foster."

"If foster is the word for -"

"For bringing up a baby that isn't your biological child, yes."

"Yes. With humans we could have many more and humans could raise them, as many as humans are ready for! Putting too many with animals is not a good idea."

"And you guys can eat anything, so if a stickleback or a revaeb or a largebeak gives you whatever they normally give their own offspring, that's fine..."

"Yes," said Dandelion again.

"...and you're now kind of thinking of yourselves as... fostered by humans."

"Yes!" It seemed very good, Dandelion thought, that Jordan understood this.

"Even though you're adults."

"Yes. But there are many things goblins do not know, that humans do! A goblin leaves the revaeb nest because the goblin knows what the revaeb can teach. Then the goblin lives with other goblins to learn what other goblins know. Now goblins live with humans to learn what humans know. If there are goblins on the mainland, they are spread out all over, and not learning from more goblins. Mainland goblins are just animals now if alive at all. Island goblins will be like humans!"

"I'm kind of surprised," Jordan said, "that you don't have some kind of instinct to stop being fostered when you reach a certain age, or something."

"Some," admitted Dandelion. "Dandelion remembers the day Dandelion stopped being a revaeb. Dandelion was done digging. Dandelion wanted to do something new. Dandelion still cannot dig just like a revaeb. There might have been more to learn from revaeb parents. Dandelion left anyway."

"So... are you going to all decide you've learned enough from humans and you're done with us, at some point?" Jordan asked.

"Dandelion doesn't think so! There is so much to learn."

Junior's hobbies were somewhat constrained. He had no peers to play sports with, or human adults to teach him any more individual skills that he sometimes saw on TV, like gymnastics. The goblins were pretty limited in what they could fabricate for him with the

materials and engineering knowhow they'd managed to piece together from the human leavings, so he didn't have a bicycle. He ran around playing pretend, by himself or with Dandelion and Oreo roped into his imagination and trying to play their assigned roles. He watched absolutely tremendous amounts of television. He played chess, mostly against the computer, because Dandelion was terrible at it and Oreo beat him every time without demoralizing handicaps.

He read books, once he could read. It took a while - both Dandelion and Oreo knew how to read but they lacked any ability to effectively convince him to practice when Junior didn't feel like it, so he picked it up in occasional bursts of enthusiasm and dropped it when frustrated and was not at grade level. He built structures out of mud in the yard.

Sometimes, he asked about the world beyond the wall, where Dandelion and Oreo went to get his food, eat their own food, take their medicine, retrieve supplies and recharged batteries and everything else that the goblins were able to produce on the bereaved human infrastructure. Robin was out there.

"The other goblins will be the first place Robin goes when Robin is done being a largebeak," Dandelion assured Junior. "Robin will think, hey, Robin is not a largebeak. Robin is something else. Robin wants to learn more. Where will Robin learn more? And Robin will find the goblins, and the goblins will take Robin here to be Junior's brother."

"Largebeaks don't know anything! - do they?"

"Largebeaks do not know most things. But largebeaks know how to walk, and how to make noises, and how to find things that are tasty to largebeaks and also to goblins. Babies know less than largebeaks."

"They don't know how to put bandaids on," Junior pointed out. "Or... how to put television on either."

"Robin does not need television yet. When Robin is here Junior can show Robin everything there is to know about television."

The colony establishment took a lot of work. They'd shipped out with what someone who'd never left Earth had imagined they might want, subject to crushing resource constraints and time pressure and logistics bottlenecks. Plus, it had all been guesswork without the slightest inkling of what planet they would get. They had the same supplies to tame their mushroom jungle that some other poor saps had to attempt to terraform their desert wasteland, that some third ship might be using to face down a waterworld full of sea monsters.

So: they had the ship itself, and all its features and cargo. Most humans were still living in the ship most of the time. It wasn't roomy, but they'd gotten used to it, and it was much less hateful as a confined space when the door was open and they could go for a turn around the settlement.

They had water recycling and filtration that could last them for years, more if they cut a few corners on the safety margins. Same for air. There was a lot of stored food on the ship all the way down to baby formula, and seeds and cuttings and spores of everything they could think of, varieties tolerant of any climate a human could live in. The science guys said, based on goblins' weather recollections, the island was about right for coconuts and bananas, workable for beans and corn and rice. They were plotting out gardens for vegetables. There was hope that one day they would have locally-grown chocolate and tea. In the longer term they could try to find spots on the mainland for things that wanted it colder or drier. Captain Jordan ordered people to cut it out when they couldn't agree on whether to try barley or pineapple in a particular plot of land. He longed for the day they could be a democracy and he could try, in the transition, to enshrine a law letting the goblins vote, so that there was some chance they could dig out of the trap he'd fallen into.

They'd packed equipment for mining, and for identifying and refining what they dug up, and for machining it into useful shapes afterwards. The people who happened to be on this ship were not, really, geologists, but a couple had read up while they were in transit and had notions about where to dig. Captain Jordan settled the arguments about whether to prioritize probably-not-copper over probably-not-iron, and asked Dandelion if she'd vote if she could.

"Does Master want Dandelion to vote?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "It wasn't your fault what happened with Marmalade, it's just..." It was just that he couldn't hold the crew together if Makenna had rallied half of them against his leadership. It was just that some people had wanted to kill the goblins down to the last. It was just that they didn't seem to *understand*, that being an advanced civilization meant you didn't let half your babies die in the nest of some witless animal that didn't know what it had next to its own nestlings. It was just that they were so useful. It was just that they barely seemed to mind, at least not in any way a human could identify.

"Dandelion will vote if Master asks!" she assured him with a sunny smile. Goblins didn't smile amongst themselves, but they'd been able to pick it up. Laughter they couldn't figure out, somehow - they repeated jokes they heard, but didn't make them and didn't seem to really get them. But goblins did have teeth and could bare them without otherwise aggressive body language.

"That's good then," Jordan sighed. "- Oh, I see Caramel waiting over there with a message, go and take it, will you?"

Robin came back to the goblins with part of one ear torn out in some childhood accident, and missing a finger, but Dandelion ushered him into the walled garden where Junior lived straightaway. She herself had a permanent crick in her ankle that she couldn't

remember not having. She could have been born with it or acquired it from one of the revaebs she'd grown up with.

"Junior! Robin is here!" she called.

Robin was half Junior's size, scrawny and nowhere near adult height even for a goblin, who topped out at around four feet. He couldn't talk, yet, because largebeaks couldn't; he'd pick up English from exposure soon enough.

"Hi Robin!" exclaimed Junior, crouching down to match his eye level. "I'm Junior, we're brothers! You were away for so SO long. But now you're home! You live here now with me and Dandy and Oreo. That's Oreo over there, see? And Dandelion's that one. Come see my mud castle!" He held out his hand and took Robin by the hand and tugged.

Robin didn't go.

Dandelion snuck up behind the young goblin with one of the slow release medication patches and stuck it on. "Robin will learn to talk soon," she assured Junior. As though that were the problem.

"Oh. Sorry, Robin! We can put on Alphabetville, instead, and that'll help probably." He pulled harder.

Robin stumbled forward, then fell into step behind Junior's eager bounce, huge eyes looking every which way at the place where now he lived.

The ship had bioreactors, for making pharmaceuticals. It was easier to put a few big vats in the lab than it was to be certain that everyone on the ship would eat a nutritionally balanced diet, especially since they hadn't had the bureaucratic capacity to cross-check with everybody's dietary restrictions. The stored food didn't include a lot of options that were safe for really serious peanut

allergies, and a couple of the picky kids on board were saved from scurvy only by the vitamin gummies produced aboard. This problem alleviated as they started their farms. They could plant whatever there was demand for, and the freeze-dried peanut butter and jelly sandwiches could be reconstituted by whoever actually found them enjoyable while the picky kids ate potatoes and fresh strawberries and - after the womb tanks were operational - lamb chops.

They still wanted vitamins, of course, and a dozen other drugs, and the bioreactors were also important for some of the inputs to the womb tanks. But they did need them less and less, once the sheep were reproducing on their own and the accelerated sugar crop came in so picky children could be coaxed to eat sweetened this-and-that.

The biologists studied goblins. They studied other local species, too, of course. They wanted to know how to best grow the kinds of mushroom-trees that made those lightweight soundproof walls the goblins built with. They wanted to figure out how to keep out the little pesky buggish things. But goblins were more cooperative subjects. The buggish things would bite and the mushroom-trees were resistant to domestication for some reason, where goblins would hold out their arms to give fluid samples. They had three different circulatory systems, which were tentatively called "blood" and "lymph" and "ichor" because the goblin words for them were unpronounceable. They'd take care of their biopsy sites themselves; they'd report on their symptoms if they tried something to see what happened.

The "parasite hormone", as it was first named despite the unpleasantness of the phrase, was discovered when the lab checked up on some baseline biomarkers in the first batch of child goblins gravitating toward their conspecifics after growing up in animal nests. (Some young goblins were being raised by humans instead, but those took much longer to get bored with the available learning material, and anyway they were being brought for regular checkups.) They noticed that there was a particular chemical in only

very low concentrations in village-dwellers (some goblins had been allowed to move back there with their human masters, for anthropological purposes). The goblins who went straight to the center of the human population had much more of it, and it went up as they became more ingratiated to the idea of learning about human life. The adult goblins who'd been hanging around humans for the longest, by contrast, had less of it than the ones who'd been doing their own thing at the time of the Marmalade incident.

Some of the lab techs isolated the stuff and gave a test subject goblin a shot of the hormone to see what happened.

A couple of weeks later all the goblins were on mandatory weekly doses, over Jordan's weak suggestions that possibly they shouldn't be drugging their captive natives.

Like most things he had to say about goblins, this fell on deaf ears. His authority was respected almost exclusively in the domains of intra-human dispute and official crew projects. He had no effective say over whether anybody chose to chemically alter their "domestic" goblin, in the same way it would have been counted as absurd if he'd forbidden people to collect local plant bouquets or weed their pineapple patches. The lab had found the chemical that made juvenile goblins servile and eager to please and intent on fitting in with the expectations of their host species so their foster parents wouldn't eat them as intruders to the nest. And they could cook it up gallons at a time, and the goblins weren't even resisting.

Jordan could probably have gotten an exception for Dandelion. She was his, after all, his - intern, his assistant, his - well, his slave. But there was a lot on his plate. There was infighting about the duty schedule, some people were agitating for democracy instead of a continuation of the captaincy and while he was all in favor he needed to nail down goblin enfranchisement, he had to adjudicate a custody battle, nobody wanted to do the mining and everybody wanted things to be mined, somebody had started ripping out ship

infrastructure to repurpose and recycle and somebody else had been counting on it staying put, there were absolutely vicious fights over whether it made sense to try to start a fish farm given how hard it would be to fence out the native sealife.

Somebody assumed that Dandelion ought to get dosed like all the other goblins and she showed up to work one morning with a patch on her side and Jordan didn't even notice.

Robin started to talk. He didn't pick up personal pronouns, but he learned his name first of all and would point at things and say "Robin?" in human-style questioning inflection to see if he could interact with them, and Junior would usually allow him to play with the toy or experiment with the buttons on the TV or dismantle a mud castle that had lost its luster. Robin was also interested, somewhat, in what Dandelion and Oreo did - clean up mud over and over, fetch things from the gate in the fence while Junior wasn't looking, solve technical difficulties with the television, mend Junior's clothes, weed the yard. But mostly they directed him to pay attention to Junior, and timed his medication for Junior's schedule, so he did.

He got bigger, but that was about it; he retained the neotenous chromatophores and the flexible ears and the mild barely-there scent that were all evolved to help him mimic a largebeak through infancy. They now persisted thanks to the patches Dandelion stuck on him religiously. Junior thought the chromatophores were spectacular; Oreo had never shown them off and Dandelion had been domesticated too late in life to still have them herself, but Junior taught Robin all the words for colors and would then have him trying to do stripes or spots, to look like this animal or that. Robin tolerated this but not with very much interest.

The TV Robin liked more than most of Junior's attempts at playing with him, but he had no tolerance for repetition, and would wander

off even over Junior's protests by the third or fourth time a given episode played. Junior learned, reluctantly, to compromise, watching new things or at least things that Robin hadn't seen yet even if they were old hat to Junior. Robin learned more words. He took up doing accents, impressions even, and Junior loved it, but Robin didn't seem to be doing it to amuse Junior. Robin paced, and skipped, and walked on his hands, and climbed - and again didn't seem to be doing it for Junior. But it wasn't the sort of thing goblins did much of back when they were living only among other goblins, so Dandelion didn't know what else could be motivating him.

One day, Robin followed Dandelion right out of the enclosure, into the place where the goblins lived in the humans' ghost town. Their own village had been long abandoned, and it was less interesting too. In the places their erstwhile masters had lived, aging baby-faced goblins read their texts and carefully experimented with their machinery and diligently produced their own hormone patches to follow their last instructions.

Robin hadn't been allowed out since he'd returned from the placement in the largebeak nest. Dandelion wouldn't have let him tailgate, only he'd gotten pretty good at camouflaging himself and moving quietly and she hadn't seen him following her. Once he was through the door he was off like a shot, haring down the dirt trail that went between the fields where they grew Junior's corn and fruit, and the half-canvas, half-mycelium structures in which goblins were trying to teach themselves about engineering and mathematics and chemistry.

"Robin!" cried Dandelion. Where could he possibly be going?

The other adult goblins in earshot gathered together a search party. But it didn't take long to find Robin. He was on the farm, hiding among the sheep. He clung to their wool when they tried to pull him away.

"Robin must stay with Junior!" scolded Dandelion.

"No!" hissed Robin. "Robin will not do it. Robin will be out here. Robin will not live in the fence."

"Robin is Junior's brother."

"No! Junior is not a goblin and Robin is!"

"Dandelion and Oreo made Robin to be Junior's brother and are bringing both up together. Robin should not run away. Robin should stay and play with Junior."

Junior was quite distraught about Robin's absence by the time Robin was dragged back, sullen and disconsolate, to the house. "You're back!" Junior exclaimed, pulling Robin into a hug that Robin limply tolerated. "You went away! Did you go to get food?"

Robin didn't answer him.

"That must have been scary," speculated Junior, pulling Robin back inside. "Oh, did you have to go to the doctor, except it'd be a goblin doctor and not one who'd come here, like on that episode of -"

"No," said Robin, tonelessly.

"I never go out," said Junior. Actually, Dandelion reflected, it was kind of peculiar that he still hadn't asked. He saw Dandelion and Oreo going in and out occasionally. He knew there was stuff out there and even sometimes had questions about it, about the other goblins and the ship and the farms and whether the sheep really said "baaa". Was he afraid? It wouldn't be a completely unreasonable fear, there were things out there that could do him harm, but he was reckless enough about anything they allowed into the enclosure.

"Robin knows," said Robin.

"So you have to stay in here, too, because you're my brother."

Junior pulled Robin into the pillow nest from which they watched TV and turned on something about going to the doctor, as doctors had once been, far away and long ago, on Earth.

Robin had seen it before. But Junior never let go of his arm.

Jordan vaguely knew all the goblins, the same way he vaguely knew all the humans. He couldn't remember all their names, but their faces were familiar - goblins did have remarkably distinctive faces - and if someone (Dandelion) jogged his memory he could place them in the social web.

"I want to increase Caramel's dose and the biolab won't approve it," said Nora Sutter, who'd drawn the short straw on mining and now had one of the most time-consuming jobs in the colony on top of three kids she'd brought along on the ship. Dandelion had surreptitiously written all the kids' names down for him in case it came up; he hoped it didn't. He didn't have kids or really want any. "Can you lean on them for me, Captain?"

Jordan frowned. "Caramel's not a particularly large goblin, is she? Why would she need a bigger dose?"

"No, but I think she must be resistant or something. I thought it was normal but then my friends came over and brought their goblin and he was extremely sweet and helpful the whole time. So's yours." She gestured at Dandelion.

"Dandelion's a treasure," said Jordan. "Maybe Caramel just isn't a good fit for - what have you got her doing?"

"Well, originally she was doing mining survey, and she was okay at that, but then my husband's schedule changed and I wanted her to spend more time minding the kids," said Nora. "She started getting -

erratic. She's been trying to learn to sing and I told her to stop; she started trying to *cook* but there's no way I'm letting her have any human food or put any goblin ingredients in the one lousy pan we've got, and then she started doing things like... Well, this last week she was the only one home with the kids and she decided to hide from them. They weren't playing hide and seek, she just found someplace to squeeze herself and they started panicking until my eldest got the idea of going to the neighbors. She said when I asked her about it that she wasn't sure what they'd do. What kind of answer is that? Also I kind of suspect she's been drawing on the walls. The kids all blame each other, and they'd do that anyway, but... yeah, I think she might have a hormone tolerance or something."

"Well, okay, I'll see what I can do, but if they're running into supply limitations or something, nothing doing. Have you considered taking her off childminding duty?"

"I will be more than happy to do that once I am no longer your chief mining coordinator, Captain," said Nora. "Or if you throw some support behind the daycare collective that the Pattersons are floating."

"It's not a bad idea, there's just always something," sighed Jordan. "Have you tried getting a better behaved goblin to talk to Caramel, see if they can figure her out?"

"Are you going to let me borrow Dandelion?"

"No, I need her, she's frankly a more capable secretary every day that goes by."

"Yeah, that's what happens whenever I ask someone. Let me know if you find a well behaved goblin who nobody needs for a couple hours."

"I take your point. Well, give the family all my best, and hopefully Caramel will get better with time."

Nora sighed. "Thank you for your time, Captain."

Junior had started hitting Robin.

Dandelion and Oreo didn't actually think this was a huge problem. The animals that goblins grew up with often played rough. Goblins did the same thing amongst themselves in a state of - not nature, but primitive culture, they'd cuff each other for swiping one another's food or making annoying noises. Robin wasn't hitting back, because they were dosing him, but it wasn't like Junior was strong enough to seriously hurt Robin when they were horsing around, even one-sidedly. Either Robin would learn not to do the things that provoked Junior, or Junior would learn that hitting didn't work very well, and it'd settle down after some information changed hands.

Robin started putting on TV that talked about Not Using Violence To Solve Problems whenever Junior let him pick the show, which was, Dandelion supposed, another way to handle the situation.

After he'd been trying that for about three days Robin ran away again. He didn't tailgate this time. He scaled the wall, sinking his claws straight into the foamy mycelium and getting up and over before anyone noticed he wasn't inside the house. This time it took hours to find him, even with practically all the goblins helping and only Oreo at home with Junior. They wrestled him inside only for him to launch himself over the wall again, and that time he was caught quickly, but it was clear he'd just keep doing it as many times as he had to.

"Does Junior want Robin to stay here?" Dandelion asked.

"Yes! He's my brother! Stupid Robin, don't run away!" Junior said, socking Robin in the shoulder.

Dandelion got an extra patch and slapped it on Robin's rump, not too gently. "Robin heard what Junior said. Stay here."

Robin didn't answer.

Caramel was discovered to have gone AWOL from her babysitting duties when Nora went home, found her children alone and halfway through their next week's ship-storage dessert ration, and raised the alarm. Eventually Dandelion, recruited into the search, located Caramel: hidden in the biolab, clinging to the underside of one of the bioreactors like a goblinous spider.

"What is Caramel doing here?" said Dandelion.

"Caramel is learning," said Caramel.

"Caramel is not supposed to be learning biology. Caramel is supposed to be minding Caramel's master's children! What is Caramel thinking?"

"Caramel is thinking more here than with the children," grumbled Caramel. She dropped off the bottom of the bioreactor and crabwalked out of the space underneath it. "Caramel cannot - Caramel -" Frustrated, she lapsed back into the shrilling language the goblins had spoken before learning English. "Without -" she began.

Dandelion smacked her hand over Caramel's mouth. "No! It is forbidden! English only. Goblins must be understood and the only way for goblins to be understood is English always."

Caramel didn't try again to explain. Dandelion called and humans came over and escorted Caramel back to her duties. The next time Dandelion saw Caramel she was wearing four patches at once and moved with a kind of sharp and manic suddenness, never looking at the same thing for more than a half-second, frenetically turning a page in the paperback she'd somehow gotten ahold of to read the next page whenever the children gave her a moment of peace.

The next time Dandelion saw Caramel after *that* was when the mob of goblins, Dandelion emphatically one of them, had gathered to kill her.

The next time Robin ran away, nobody could find him. They searched the whole island in several different patterns, and eventually concluded that he might have tried to swim to the mainland. Largebeaks swam sometimes, so he might easily know how, though it was a considerable distance.

It was night at the time Robin was first missed, and Junior was fast asleep, or so they all thought until Dandelion returned to his bedroom to ask what he wanted for breakfast.

Caramel started with the kids, but she didn't stop there. She knew exactly who was missing from the communal brunch event that the farm department threw to celebrate their latest crop milestone. After she'd seen every attendee eat a bite of the fruit salad, she went around, all chirpy innocence, to everyone who'd been too tired or antisocial to go, and slit their throats.

Caramel didn't hurt any goblins. It didn't help her once they found out what she had done.

"Dandelion wasn't done!" Dandelion screamed, as she and the goblins around her closed in on Caramel, disarmed and sitting quite still on the ground. "Dandelion was still learning! Master was still teaching Dandelion everything Master knew!"

"Humans knew nothing!" Caramel retorted. "All the things humans seemed to know were in human writings and recordings! Goblins can learn from those without any humans! Goblins can learn faster without doing humans' chores!"

"The humans were important!" Dandelion insisted, but her own cry was drowned out as the crowd pressed closer to Caramel, every one of them with some objection to her genocidal overthrow of their masters. "The humans were showing goblins how to live together with humans so goblins could keep learning!"

Caramel didn't resist. She closed her eyes as the crowd began to tear her apart.

Dandelion thought she heard Caramel say, "You're free."

But it wasn't true.

Prophecy

Chant wrote, in the good ink, with flourishes he'd practiced a thousand times:

I am open to the Divine, to be spoken to and through; may the Divine make me its vessel.

The letters were almost too tiny to see. His pen was needle-sharp and his hand was very precise.

While the ink dried, he moved on to the next little square of paper and wrote it again.

At the same time, he was humming. He couldn't sing while he was writing, not the whole time. His voice would give out; his hands were only this tolerant of all the minuscule calligraphy after years of practice. When his throat began to threaten to be sore he switched to humming, or sometimes tapping his feet to the rhythm of the same chant he was writing.

He came to the end of a batch. The writing on the first square was thoroughly dry. Chant picked it up and folded it into a neatly creased origami component of the prayer ball he was building. The back of the paper, lustrous red, caught the light from the high shallow window in his chamber. He tucked it into place in the ball and folded the next one. He misfolded the fourteenth square in the batch, sang an apology while he burnt it, and wrote a replacement to dry and form its own segment of the ball.

When the prayer ball was finished, after another forty-five batches over the next few weeks adding scale after scale to the sphere of paper, it'd go up on a fishing line to hang from the ceiling of his cell. He had a lot of them already. The building's rooms were built with

high ceilings covered in hooks, so you could hang some dangling low in between others tucked up high against the paint. Chant was working on a third altitude of ball now, and had to duck around them by the door.

Nobody else in seminary had this many and it was Chant's greatest anxiety.

Some people chose other ways to beseech the Divine. Chant had school chums who were pure meditators, ones who took psychedelics, who deprived themselves of sleep and food and touch and sunlight and comfort until their medical supervisors intervened and then started all over again. There had been, the previous year, a group of six foreign exchange students who spoke broken Prophecy (though, naturally, they called their own language their own word for Prophecy) and were all seeking the Divine by having bizarre sexual congress with one another in configurations Chant hadn't even tried to understand. Apparently it had worked in the past. Lots of things worked, if you kept at them long enough with a sincere heart. The Divine wasn't hiding, it was just far away.

Chant put his in-progress prayer ball in its protective box, since it wouldn't hold up well to any jostling before it was finished. He got to his feet, hunched over so he wouldn't disturb any of the bright hanging monuments to just how far away.

From him. It was especially far away from him.

The lunch bell was ringing and Chant joined the general flow of traffic to the dining hall, where he collected his pre-ladled bowl of mashed potatoes and topped them with a selection of vegetables and scrambled eggs. He cast his eyes around and landed on someone he knew, one of the self-abnegation types who was only in the cafeteria to steel herself against its contents. There was disagreement about whether this made sense, whether being tempted and (presumably) resisting would get you closer to the

Divine than simply locking yourself in a cell and praying till you collapsed. Diozi was in the former camp. She had her eyes closed and was inhaling the scent of food regularly, probably re-committing herself to the Divine with every breath.

She noticed the scrape of the chair when Chant sat down across from her. "Oh, hello," she said, opening her eyes. She looked tired. Probably coming off an all-nighter. "How is it going?"

"Uh, halfway through prayer ball thirty-three," said Chant, sheepish.

Diozi's brow knit. "Are you sure prayer balls are the way to go for you?" she asked gently. She paused partway through the sentence to lick her lips. Her medical supervisor usually let her get away without water for no more than twelve hours at a time but that was plenty of opportunity to get chapped. That, or she was just smelling the mashed potatoes.

"I did try other things," said Chant. "That's how I got my nickname. The prayer balls feel right, but - no, there's really no way to be sure." He shrugged awkwardly. "Supposedly the average is twenty-two complete balls, but that's only counting people who do eventually prophesy, right? If I give up, the average they tell new enrollments will drop, but not because of how quickly I made it to the Divine..." He took a forkful of lunch. It needed salt. He tried to imagine how good it would taste to Diozi, swinging between deprivation and relief. This improved the experience but only a little.

"I think I'm getting close and I've only been here five years," said Diozi.

And Chant was coming up on nine. "I know a lot of people are quicker," he acknowledged. Sometimes he tossed and turned at night, wondering what he was doing wrong. He felt so sure that the problem wasn't the prayer balls, just - that he had a longer way to go to reach the Divine, or that it had something especially

complicated to say to him and he needed to meet it more than halfway. He wanted so keenly to know what it would tell him.

"I could be wrong about being close," she acknowledged. "And I suppose Medical might send me packing an inch from the finish line."

"- well, you could still fast at home, right?" said Chant. "I'd run out of money for papers, but fasting isn't expensive."

"Of course fasting is expensive," said Diozi. "It's not safe to go hard on it without supervision, and even doing it gentler so I won't die I'd have a heck of a time working an ordinary job. My sister works at a store, folding clothes and ringing people up at the counter, and my hands would shake too much to do that, or to wait tables, or drive a bus. Usually when I come off a long fast I have to start with things that go through a straw before I can pick up a fork." She was staring at his bowl as she said this, then closed her eyes again and inhaled, exhaled, inhaled, exhaled. "I'd have to stop, or only do it on weekends, or something. That's if I even wanted to keep trying."

"Wouldn't you?" Chant blinked at her. It would certainly take longer and be more difficult, working toward meeting the Divine weekends only, but only a few prophets got more than one revelation in their lifetimes anyway. She might wait until she was forty, but then she'd know what it wanted to tell her!

She shrugged awkwardly. "I want a prophecy of my own," she said. "But if I couldn't focus on it, I'd find other things to want. Regular people don't even start trying, even if a hobbyist amount of practice could get them there eventually. I'd blend in with the regular people. They say you're the average of the five people you spend the most time with."

"Oh," said Chant, who had never really considered not trying to commune with the Divine. He'd known since he was very small that

if it was trying to speak to him he had to do his end of the work to bring its voice to his ear.

"I do think I'm close, though." She smiled encouragingly. "You probably are too. You work so hard."

After lunch Chant went back to his chamber and worked some more on the prayer ball. This one was in shades of red. He worked with whatever papers were on sale at the school store, buying them out of his scholarship stipend, winding up with whatever nobody else had snapped up at full price. Most of his balls were mostly white since that was available in the greatest bulk, that and marked-down leftover holiday palettes that he remixed with one another. Unbroken Eve's navy blue camouflaged with Holy Spring fawn and pink. He cared a little about the balls not being riots of orange and purple and glitter rainbow, but only a little. Any colors that were cheap would do. It was not unrelated to how he'd stretched his scholarship so far to begin with.

It was written that the first recorded prophet - the first one to have any surviving notes scribbled down about him, after uncounted generations of prophets from before the invention of the alphabet - spent twenty years of his adult life in prayer, for his first revelation, and that it was mostly about how to do it more efficiently next time. After that he took ten for the second, and ten for the third, and ten for the fourth, and that was the last one he achieved in his lifetime. A fifty percent reduction in average time was pretty good. All the following iterations on his example had accomplished the same, but only once in aggregate. Five years was the new normal, for a supported student of divinity committed to trying.

There were faster ones. The first recorded prophet hadn't been a particular talent, he'd just known some nerd who'd picked up scribal skills. Occasionally a shining star would appear on the scene, sunk halfway into the Divine with every breath and thought, repeating

mantras when they snored, and they'd announce their prophecy with only three or four summers of study under their belts, and sometimes they could keep up that pace, too. And to balance them out...

Well, there was Chant.

There were occasionally flyers up on the school of divinity's campus. A nearby academic university had a thriving social sciences department and they wanted to predict who got the flashiest prophecies, the fastest ones, the clearest and most usable. They wanted to sift through everybody's data and find a way to predict of some pious elementary schooler that they'd be able to blitz through a prayer-wheel-oriented practice in thirty-nine months flat. They wanted to find the most miraculous talents so as to come out with a divinely inspired policy opinion on sect reconciliation that healed every tiff and quibble between the Ancients, and the Incorrupt, and every minor splinter cult following some fraud's "prophecy" that everyone should give him all their money and daughters.

(Chant's school was Incorrupt, but he didn't strongly subscribe to the one over the other. The Ancient spoke to the same Divine. Even the official Incorrupt catechism didn't call any major Ancient prophets liars. The strange sex-based prayers of the exchange students were offputting, but not erroneous - they were reaching in the same direction Chant himself was.)

At any rate, Chant had duly signed up for some studies. They usually paid in cash, since they had a hard time attracting a representative sample of fasters if they tried to bribe the divinity students with chips and soda. He'd been told that he was statistically likely to drop out. He'd been told that he was repressing his prophecy and it had most likely come to him already, missed somehow among half-remembered dreams and anxiety about his supply of coins for the washing machines. He'd been told that he had none of the hallmarks

of being a successful prophet and would probably get a minor update on a mathematical question to spoil some professor's career.

Chant had said, to the last surveyor, "Wouldn't that be something, though? The Divine does speak through numbers and figures, and to know a little more about what it has to say there, in plain provable notation so that everyone who wanted to could understand by reading the right math textbook -"

The surveyor had not had time to talk about Chant's feelings about how worthwhile it would be to invest seven or eight years of his life into receiving a proof of a mysterious conjecture. He'd waved the next divinity student in to go over the questions and see what the model predicted for her.

The dinner bell rang. Chant finished his calligraphic sentence, pinned his still-drying papers to the desk with his fingers and blew on them so he could fold them up safely, and scurried out once they were all accounted for.

Diozi wasn't there. That wasn't unusual; even fasters who showed up to be tempted usually didn't want to do it on the schedule of everyone else's meals. Sometimes at this hour she took sparkling water and vitamin pills with a checkup in the health office. There wasn't really anyone else Chant regularly sat with. Everyone who'd entered when he had was gone by now, many with their prophecies and their careers in counseling or ministry or social work or theology or policy or whatever their visions suited them to. Prophecies weren't fundamentally incommunicable, but they lost things in translation. If the Divine could have spoken in words perhaps it would have been easier to get in touch.

The others, who had not gotten prophecies, were gone because they'd dropped out. Whenever Chant sat with some younger students, they gave him sidelong looks, wondering why he hadn't done exactly that.

He sat near but not right next to a knot of meditators. Most of them were eating as quickly as possible so as to get back to their practices, but some were taking thoughtful bites of porridge soup so it could drizzle down their throats without active chewing and they could concentrate on the experience.

None of them felt like talking, but that was fine. Chant wasn't lonely, just pensive. His classmates were well into their adult lives. Not that he was a child, at twenty-six, but - he didn't know what he was going to be when he grew up. If he got a prophecy about how to solve drug addiction in a particular city he'd be spending the next decade on that, at least. If he got one about how to teach or compose devotional music or - he had no idea what the Divine would tell him. Besides "nothing". On any given day that tended to be what he got.

He really wanted to know, though.

When he'd finished his dinner he nodded to the meditators and went back to his chamber to fold some more prayers.

Back in his first years at the seminary Chant had taken classes. Technically he still could. He'd done it when he'd been ordered to rest his hand following a bit of a repetitive stress complaint. But the requirements were designed to be knocked out in three years or less, before typical scholarships ran out, to allow more time for concentrating on prophesying. History, catechism, philosophy, a required seminar on practices to connect to the Divine in case they were pursuing options that were wrong for them. Seminary students could bus over to the academic university too, if they wanted. Chant learned to make paper, when the art department over there offered a half-semester workshop on it. He'd had the idea that it would connect him more deeply to the process of writing his prayers and shaping his origami if he also made the paper. Unfortunately it turned out that handmade paper was unsuitable - too thick and lumpy. He hadn't taken any classes in a while.

Chant swung by Diozi's dormitory, after he'd finished another batch of origami, to see if she was awake enough to take a walk with him. She slept a lot. It came of being so hungry. Technically she was supposed to be depriving herself of sleep, too, but she'd relaxed on that when she couldn't get through a whole chapel service conscious. Better to take a little longer to reach the Divine with less onerous devotions than to be unable to listen to a sermon.

She didn't seem to be home, though. Chant asked her roommate.

"Oh, you didn't hear!" said the roommate, who was rebandaging a devotional tattoo on her shoulder. It depicted the stylized Divine commanding the first recipients to seek peace and reconciliation, though it was stylized enough that Chant might not have recognized it out of context.

"No, I didn't," Chant said agreeably, "where is she?"

"She got her prophecy! She collapsed in the bathroom and somebody from across the hall found her and she came to and -" A vague gesture. "She's probably still at medical."

"Oh!" exclaimed Chant, and he about-faced to head for the infirmary building.

Diozi was conscious and well enough to accept visitors. He went in to the row of beds; she was propped up in one with an ice pack on her temple and half a milkshake on her lap. She slurped as he approached.

"Your roommate told me you got your prophecy!" he exclaimed, taking the hand that wasn't holding her beverage. "Congratulations! But how's your head?"

"Throbbing like a drumline," Diozi admitted. "They're not sure I'm not concussed, I'm a little worried it'll make it hard to - remember, translate -"

"Oh *no* . I won't ask you to tell me all about it right now, then, I can wait." He patted her hand. "Do you want me to bring you anything?"

"Well, I'm not supposed to read, or do anything interesting," said Diozi, wry, "just try to fall asleep. So maybe if you wanted to run and get my music player it'd help me get un-wired enough to crash for the night, but I might be snoring by the time you get back either way."

"I'll get it," said Chant. "In case you want it before they release you. It's no trouble."

"Thank you," she said, smiling a watery smile, and she polished off her shake and set the cup aside.

She was, true to her guess, fast asleep by the time Chant returned with her player. He put it on her bedside table, draped another blanket over her because she had goosebumps, and -

What had he been going to Diozi's room for in the first place? He couldn't remember now. Simple company, probably. He didn't exactly have a firm sense of time passing when he was deep in prayer-writing and prayer-folding, assembling the balls, trimming imperfectly cut edges off papers, blending new ink - but he did accumulate all the usual privations that a person collects over the course of the day, loneliness included, and Diozi was his closest friend. He could just turn in early himself, but...

He really, really wanted to know, not only what the Divine had said to Diozi, but what it would say to *him* .

He went back to his cell and he resumed his work.

The end-of-term assessments were usually pretty rubber-stamped. He took a picture of his dangling forest of prayer balls, to show to

his assessor, and expected to be nodded at and sent along to make some more. That was what had happened every time before.

"Enesh." Chant's advisor didn't like using his nickname. "Usually we like to see... progress."

"I haven't slowed down at making the balls," said Chant. "I'm more than halfway through the in-progress one."

"Progress toward *prophecy*."

That wasn't, as Chant understood it, the sort of thing you had "progress" toward. You'd collapse like Diozi, or you'd wake up at three in the morning twitching with visions, or you'd get up on a table in the dining hall and start ranting disjointed dream fragments that you weren't able to render as orderly language in real time. It was sudden.

Before he could formulate these objections aloud, the assessor went on: "You've been here, I'm sure you've noticed, quite a bit longer than average. Your scholarship is from the Foundation for a Closer Divine. Their mission is to increase the number of prophecies so that more aspects of mortal life can be informed by sacred guidance. You're coming up on costing twice as much for your first prophecy as some students cost for two."

"Who's getting *two* in this amount of time?" said Chant.

"It's not common, but neither is your situation."

"The first recorded receivers took more than a decade."

"The first recorded receivers lived long ago. They had only very limited support from their communities and would have spent much of their time on preindustrial labor, or recovering without useful medical attention from various diseases. Penicillin wasn't revealed until - you should know all this, Enesh. The point of the scholarship

is to support you in a lifestyle of prayer that, in typical persistent students, results in prophecy in less than seven years. And the Foundation has determined that, since you're not a typical student, it must cut its losses somewhere. Somewhere is here. You have two weeks to say your goodbyes, pack your belongings, make travel and lodging arrangements for where you'll stay -"

"Try a blitz?" Chant asked.

"- yes, you may use your grace period to try a blitz."

It was called a "blitz" when a frustrated divinity student took a few days and threw everything they had at the chasm between themselves and the Divine. It was usually a fast and a drug cocktail and a long stint in a sensory deprivation tank with no human contact. It was not safe. Medical supervisors, even if they didn't refuse to participate out of principle, constituted human contact. Some people wore heart rate monitors and asked to be bailed out if something went too far wrong, but that tended to interfere with the very psychological state they were trying to achieve. One wanted to exist in a microcosm of the world in which only oneself and the Divine were present. The promise of rescue punctured the illusion. The improved survival rates weren't usually judged worth it, not among the kinds of people who tried a blitz at all.

Blitzes had been a legal grey area until a particular prophet had succeeded at one. She'd gotten advance warning of what would have been a devastating earthquake, and evacuated the affected area in time. She'd spent the rest of her career working on enshrining the right to blitz. She had, she explained, saved many more people with one success than would have been lost (among consenting adult volunteers, not innocent earthquake victims) over a hundred failures.

The success rate wasn't actually as low as one percent, but it was pretty bad.

But almost everyone who lived had a prophecy at the end of it. Presumably some of those who died, died in the throes of contact with the Divine.

Chant had never wanted to do a blitz. He wanted to be alive to deliver his prophecy. He wanted to know what the Divine had to say to him, but he also wanted to spend longer than half a delirious hour knowing it, have a chance to put it into practice. He knew it might not be as amazing as evacuating for an earthquake. A lot of people, especially in modern times, got instructions from the Divine to go work in public policy or childhood education and do some subtle nondefault thing there, and they never got a particularly clear picture of what would have happened otherwise. And people could and did fail in living up to what the Divine had asked of them, and spend their prophesied career like anyone else as the shine wore off and people stopped listening to them so attentively.

But better a blitz than to be cast out into the world, trying, as Diozi had described, to hold down a job with only prayer balls and really good handwriting. Actually, he wasn't sure his handwriting was good in the general case. It only got practice with the specific prayer. It wasn't even a pangram.

He'd still *try*, if he had to get an apartment and an entry-level job somewhere. People had gotten prophecies before without fancy school-store paper, without the good ink, without indeed being literate at all. But if he could convince the Divine that he was meeting it halfway *this weekend*, that would be - well. Risky. But he would try it.

He prepped for his blitz. You were supposed to go on a liquid diet before you quit eating altogether, to eliminate... elimination... interruptions. Usually you'd have a catheter, though some people just went ahead and peed in the water they floated in while they were being sensorily deprived. They said it wasn't much different than a public pool and definitely wasn't one of the more hazardous

parts of the experience. Chant didn't have a strong opinion and accepted the blitz counselor's advice on this, as everything else.

He swallowed pills. He received injections. He put in earplugs and donned a mask. He stripped down and got in the tank.

He floated. He prayed.

He promptly lost track of time. That was normal. That could happen with the tank or the drugs alone, let alone the two of them together. It was okay. He could float here for what felt like a hundred years and he would be fished out when he was expected to be over the school's risk threshold. The pool he floated in had a disposable plastic liner, to make it easier to clean up when they discovered, not a prophecy, but a body.

He got hungrier. Thirstier, too, the water around him was saltier than the sea even if he'd wanted to chance the urine. He tried not to lick his lips or think about food. Prayer. He was here for prayer, to speedrun his prayers. He missed his ink and paper, his cell and the scratch of his pen, the balls hanging above him as monuments to his own dedication whenever he worried he'd slacken.

I am open to the Divine, to be spoken to and through; may the Divine make me its vessel.

I am open to the Divine, to be spoken to and through; may the Divine make me its vessel.

I am open to the Divine, to be spoken to and through; may the Divine make me its vessel.

There were more complicated prayers. There were sects that believed that repetition was actually an inferior form and every prayer should be constructed on the spot, to the point that the less creative among them just noted the date and time before they began. But Chant was drawn to this one, this simplest and first call

into the void that separated mortality from divinity, volunteering everything he was to learn and speak, to become a conduit and a prophet.

He floated. He prayed. His stomach roiled. He got disturbing closed-eye visuals and lost proprioception below the waist. Hopefully that would come back later. He had a button to call for help, if he wanted it while he could still use it, but he didn't. He wanted the prophecy. He didn't have one yet. He was going to float here until he got one.

Chant scanned somebody's carton of strawberries.

"You look sort of familiar," said the somebody, sticking them into her reusable canvas bag. It had a picture of a salad on it, and the name of a salad restaurant.

"One of those faces," said Chant distantly.

It had been a minor news item when he'd managed, somehow, to be pulled from a blitz alive and unsuccessful. Most people hit the button and reported their prophecies within a couple of days. Or they were pulled out, too weak to reach for it or too delirious to find it, but revealed what they'd seen once they convalesced.

He'd floated, and floated. He'd been told it had been forty-nine hours. He'd needed four days in the hospital catching up on hydration.

He hadn't seen anything except funky colors. He hadn't felt anything except a drug-addled emotional storm that added up to nothing when examined sober. He hadn't heard anything except his own pulse, his own relentless breath.

They'd pulled his yearbook photo for the article. He was now known among people who read relevant newspapers, or followed religious

news specifically, for being so far from the Divine that he could live through a blitz without it deigning to touch him.

Fortunately he wasn't that distinctive-looking. He'd gotten a haircut. It had been his dad's advice for job hunting.

He rang up a man's apple juice.

I am open to the Divine, to be spoken to and through; may the Divine make me its vessel.

Some people took longer. Some people were fast, sure. Some people took totally normal amounts of time in a totally normal setting. But if Chant kept praying, murmuring under his breath as he scanned barcodes and bagged canned soup, he had years and years left in him. Long enough to cross the gulf. Long enough to reach across to listen to what the Divine had to say. Blitzing hadn't done it, so what? Maybe it also didn't do it for lots of dead people and the special thing about Chant was more about his ability to tolerate drug interactions while absorbing water exclusively through his skin. He wasn't an old man.

The grocery store job made enough money to pay his parents some nominal rent, contribute to the household groceries, and cover other expenses that he suddenly had to worry about with his scholarship gone. He was saving up for a big bulk stack of papers to fold into ball components, but for the time being he was just back to the practice that had given him his name. Murmuring, always, whenever he had a spare moment. Under his breath. Aloud if he was in a setting where it seemed not too out of place. Occasionally people around him would join in when he did it on the bus. He attended three church services a week, though his parents only aspirationally managed one.

"Amen," said a scruffy man buying a bag of cheese slices and nothing else with his food assistance card.

Chant smiled at him and folded the receipt, quick as a wink, into the shape that would make a ball if you had enough of them. It got a gapped-toothed laugh.

Chant's mother wanted him to date, give her some grandchildren. Chant wasn't some caricatured sexless monk, abstinence had never been his practice, but he didn't want to. He didn't feel ready - how could he build a life with someone when he was still trying to leave his life open to radical course alteration? What if he met someone, got engaged, planned to settle down and bend around their intended course, only to get a prophecy that required him to pack up and travel to another continent to apply his new knowledge to curing a plague or teaching literacy to a population that had only just worked out a written form of their language or - there were so many possibilities.

It had been a long time since anyone had gotten an entire language as part of their prophecy. It had been more common in the scriptural era. Chant's father sometimes opined, over breakfast or while flipping through channels, that prophecy quality had gone down a lot. Maybe there were only so many worthwhile things to say, and they were getting spread around more with refined efficient techniques for extracting them from the Divine, but surely, thought Chant, languages would be one thing there should be lots of in that case? Maybe the scriptures were just exaggerating. It could be that they were combining multiple people's prophecies, or multiple revelations a single person had picked up over a long and devout lifetime, and recording them as one. It could be that translations over time made them sound more impressive. Maybe with worse technology and other privations of the past, more dramatic torrents of information were necessary to make anyone capable of effecting significant change.

Diozi didn't visit. She'd moved to an island to take an ombudswoman position, managing constituent complaints in a town Chant had

never heard of like some kind of public access social worker. He wasn't clear, even after a few phone conversations with her, whether the Divine had directed her to the specific posting, or if it was just available to anyone with a prophecy under their belt and she didn't have instructions to go elsewhere. Vague prophecies that qualified people for things like that, or for ethics advisory panels, or for the priesthood, were more common than earthquake premonitions or the discovery of oral rehydration therapy or the inspiration behind the most spectacular works of art. Maybe in Diozi's case the concussion was interfering and she'd lost some important feature of the communique. Seemed inconsiderate of the Divine, if so, to give her the prophecy at that moment and not the week following.

She called less and less often and seemed impatient when he wanted to know more about her prophecy. He stopped asking after awhile. He couldn't imagine not wanting to dissect his own with anyone who'd listen, but that was him. Maybe she'd been asked to keep it private? Not unheard of, just - odd. Usually the most profound and moving prophecies were the ones that were urgent to disseminate. Some people did get private ones, but Diozi hadn't actually said hers was private.

Chant prayed. He didn't date. A grocery store co-worker, Faran from the floral department, made some insinuations in his direction and he played dumb. He wanted to be ready for anything, and besides, Faran didn't seem to be very religious. Chant didn't think there was anything wrong with not being very religious, exactly. The Divine's gifts were to be shared unconditionally, and judging people for not being religious about it looked kind of like a condition when he thought about it. Faran was entitled to the fruits of all prophecies including the one he hoped for without any required performance in return. But he was himself devout as could be given his limited spare time. It didn't seem like it would be a good match on a personal level.

When Chant was 36, he had something of a crisis of faith.

He was managing the produce department at this point. His parents kept suggesting training programs that would qualify him for more interesting work, but he'd held out hope. The grocery store wasn't a bad job. He hummed hymns while he stacked oranges into pyramids and weeded the greens for any that looked off. The customers liked him. Faran from the floral department had married a friend of her brother's and they were expecting a baby. And he could drop the job, if he ever got word that he needed to.

It just didn't look very likely.

Even the first recorded prophets hadn't taken this long. Chant could have told himself a just-so story about how modern life was worldly and distracting, but the fact was that average time spent in dedicated prayer per prophecy had dropped steadily throughout written history. He was no longer just an outlier for the age, he was an outlier for the entire class of prophets. And that was if you completely ignored the failed blitz, which was baffling on any model. He couldn't pretend, anymore, that the Divine was going to talk to him in any remotely normal time frame.

Maybe it didn't like him, and most people just gave up before having it rubbed in their face so hard. Maybe it had said something while he was having dehydration seizures and he had complete amnesia about it. Maybe he was praying wrong, somehow, even though his sect boasted no fewer prophecies per capita than any other major strain of the faithful. He tried an Ancient version of the basic prayer for a week, trying to get used to it. It felt wrong in his mouth and made a foreign old lady mistake him for someone who'd understand her paragraph about the tangerines. He didn't even know how to say "sorry" in her language. She complained about him at customer service in broken local Prophecy.

He experimented, briefly, with not trying any more.

This turned out not to make much difference. He was a creature of habit. His habit was to pray. When he wasn't doing it purposefully he did it on accident. It'd spill from his lips when he stocked grapes and leeks. He'd be walking to the bus stop and catch himself already halfway through a song of beseeching. He gave up trying to suppress it after a couple of days, and was back to full-throated pleading for the Divine to touch him just once a few days after that.

He'd made friends with Faran after a fashion, once she was clear that he did not want to date her and had found comfort from this mild inconvenience in the arms of her now-husband. Sometimes where the lilies met the carrots they talked. Mostly about her, because her life was more interesting - she was buying baby clothes, she was arguing with her sister-in-law, she was thinking about middle names. Sometimes about him, though.

"Maybe it just needs to tell you something really big," she suggested. "And it's... gotta whisper. So you've gotta get right up next to it, not halfway."

"It's a nice thought," said Chant. He was partially shucking ears of corn to provide those windows into their kernels that the shoppers preferred. If prophecy were corn, he was not getting a window into the kernels. Just a mountain of husks and silk, looking for one gold nugget and crossing his fingers that it would be sweet. He was so, so hungry.

"You don't think so?"

"I wouldn't expect it."

"Maybe it's something with fussy timing, like the Yellow Fault earthquake, and it's saving you for the proper day."

"Maybe." It was likelier, or sounded likelier. "There are more divinity students all the time, though. I'm not so well placed that there's

much that'd better come from me late rather than from one of them in the right place at the right time."

"Maybe..." Faran trailed off. She'd run out of ideas. "I dunno. You pray harder than my priest. You pray harder than anybody I ever met. You ought to get something for it."

"I'd like to. But I've got to acknowledge, haven't I, that it's not looking too probable."

"I don't think you've got to acknowledge anything till the Divine makes you," said Faran, and at that he managed a real laugh.

Chant was forty. His birthday a month gone, he was dealing with his mother's hospital logistics. As soon as she got released for one thing, another complaint or scheduled elective reared its head. The Incorrupt didn't do a lot of praying for specific people or outcomes. Why would they, when the Divine knew what they needed and was doing the best it could to guide them to all the solutions whenever someone came close enough to hear its voice? But the Ancient sect did, not because it helped but because it wouldn't hurt, and he'd picked up a little of the habit during one of his regular long dark nights of the soul. He prayed she would be well as he sealed the envelope with the payment for her latest adventure with cardiology, and then lapsed back into his usual muttering chant.

The envelope went in the mailbox. The checkmark went on the to-do list and he moved on. He'd learned to cook and was making dinner more nights than not, now, since his mother was often fatigued and his father lately struggled to read labels on packaging, resulting in one memorable salt/sugar confusion. He put some water on to boil for the noodles and peas, and didn't salt it since his mother was supposed to be on a low sodium diet. Probably his father would ask if she'd like some sugar on hers; he was trying to turn it into a running joke.

"I am open to the Divine, to be spoken to and through; may the Divine make me its vessel," Chant whispered, opening the package of pasta. "I am open to"

The pasta disappeared from his awareness, with the pot of water, the kitchen, his own hands and heartbeat. Untethered, he thought the next words: "the Divine", and very nearly continued by rote, but - that was it, here and now and already, wasn't it. The Divine.

That or a near-death experience, drug flashback, seizure -

No.

It was not quite a word. The psychic equivalent of a red circle with a slash through it. That one concept would be easy enough to translate, but Chant assumed that the Divine did not only want to tell him "no". At least he was unshakably clear that it meant he wasn't having a drug flashback. It would have been a real body blow if it had called him into a prophecy just to tell him to stop bothering it.

It would never do that, it said. Its benevolence was a tangible thing, as obvious once Chant thought about it as the friction of breath in his throat. It was the Divine; it loved him and everyone; and it had something to say, to him, to Chant specifically and only out of all the would-be prophets over the world.

Floating in its benign omnipresence, Chant leaned in - or thought of leaning in, there was no difference in this un-place.

I have given twenty-nine prophecies in the past year including this one, said the Divine.

Was - was *that* Chant's holy revelation, just a count of the prophecies for the -

Wait. That couldn't be right. Chant's old school alone graduated a hundred-something prophets every year. There were other schools, bigger ones. There were independent practitioners who meditated on their own time and turned up with a vision from the Divine. A run of the mill prophecy wasn't even news. They happened every day. Twenty-nine had to be - that was less than once a week. Had he somehow managed to - mishear, the Divine, was that even possible -

No.

If there had been fewer than thirty real prophecies in the last year then there were thousands of frauds - if that year was representative -

It is. It has been declining as people have begun expecting faster and faster results.

Then there were thousands, annually, there were *hundreds* of thousands still walking around pretending, lying. Only a handful of the most dramatic prophecies could be real, like the earthquake one. Everyone else was - *Diozi* was, not that he'd spoken to her in years, just making it up. For instance. Almost everybody -

Some have fooled themselves. Some are lying but with good intentions, seeking the credibility that will let them attempt their project or scheme. Some are unwilling to admit that they are ready to give up, and they give up without admitting it. Some are genuinely conniving for respect and influence - though not as many as you are imagining, because most begin hoping for a true prophecy and only later contrive the need to fabricate one.

Chant could hardly wrap his mind around it. He thought he'd known so many prophets. His priest was a fake. His teachers. Everyone he'd entered divinity school with. That customer at the grocery store with the prayer beads and the social worker badge who'd sometimes come in at six in the morning with a teary client to treat them to ice cream. Most of the members of most governments.

He had to tell - who could he tell. Who would believe him? He'd have to determine who the real ones were, maybe, and rally them together somehow to present a united front, so he wouldn't just be one lone fraud. One fraud, a forty-year-old divinity school dropout who'd lived through a failed blitz, would be so much easier to swallow than the epidemic the Divine was telling him about now. But he'd be able to identify the ones who couldn't possibly be fabricating it, who'd had information there was no other way to get -

You will not need to figure it out.

Oh, those were the real ones. This was admittedly less information than an entire language. And they'd have had a real shared experience, and they wouldn't be strangely reluctant to talk about it.

It will take time.

Right. Of course it would. This wasn't going to come as a mild aside on the evening news. It was going to be a body blow to everyone, to everything. Careers would end, good work would fall with bad justifications, governments might topple - had that been why the Divine waited so long to puncture the deception?

It took time to arrange the conditions for success here. I am sorry.

Sorry? What was it -

The un-place was collapsing like cotton candy in the rain. The love and the peace and the certainty drained away. There was just Chant, on the floor, with a smarting elbow and an angrily boiling pot of water.

What was it sorry for? That it'd be hard? That he'd have to spend the rest of his life on this? Hadn't he always wanted to spend the rest of his life on a mission from the Divine -

Oh. It was sorry it had taken so long, he realized, sitting up and wincing as the elbow twinged. It was sorry he'd needed to wait all that time to hear its voice.

"It's okay," he whispered. "I understand. It's going to take years and years and nobody will recognize what I'm working towards at first. But you know I can do it. And I've been waiting long enough that I know too."

Chant got up and put the pasta in the pot. He set his timer, and started writing up a plan.

Hole

Once upon a time there was a hole.

I could tell you that this hole was deep, or wide. I could tell you it was rough inside, or smooth. I could say it was big, say it was small, say it went clear through or that it could hold water. I could say it was in the ground or in a wall or in your bedsheet or in a cloud. And all these things that I might claim? They'd all be true.

The hole was a shapeshifter.

Most shapeshifters are not holes. In fact, most of them aren't even *sometimes* holes. They might turn into different people and leave it at that, just another layer of potential personalization under the makeup and the clothes. Or they might be skilled enough to be other animals, and swim with the fish and fly with the birds and go superluminal with the void-whales, and never bother with your pedestrian sort at all. Some can be plants, or mushrooms, and a few have even learned to be yeasts and euglenas and things like that.

There are other strains of shapeshifter that can become rocks and boxes, pens and pegs, chairs and stairs. These are the most patient kind. They will lurk for far longer than might seem normal, ignoring small provocations, to ambush the right prey at the right moment. (This kind of shapeshifter is carnivorous. They mostly haven't got the hang of being a bush long enough to fix themselves a nice lunch out of only sunshine.) A shapeshifter just like that might be biding its time right now as the hat on your head or the moon in your very own sky.

But the one I am talking about was a hole.

The hole did not know where it had come from. This is always something of a confusing question for shapeshifters, as many are not exactly raised in the culture. They sprout from seeds and spend a perfectly respectable forty years being a Ponderosa pine tree and then one day notice that they are really quite consistent about winning the canopy-height race and, having learned this about themselves, they branch out a bit, so to speak. Or they are born in a normal family just like yours and discover that it is not as customary as they thought, to heal so fast and to have such a nice complexion, and the next week they are socially engineering themselves into corporate espionage under faces not their own.

The kind that are objects have it even worse. A car expects itself to make choices much less than a tree does. Some, after normal childhood amnesia about a few growing pains and their time as a Hot Wheels, go for the entire standard lifespan of a car, bearing up proudly well under salt and scratches, resisting tire changes the way you flinch at having a suspicious mole removed, but otherwise doing nothing very exceptional. They may be passed from owner to owner until one finally trades it in for the tax advantage or because they can no longer see the road well enough. They realize in blind terror, at the moment that the car-crushing machinery at the junkyard is coming for them, that they have other capacities, and can become a traumatized chunk of uranium, foxing the electronics but good and frightening away anyone who might wish it harm. Typically, if they evade collection by opportunistic nuclear technicians, they then spend a few years working through their issues, and imitating discarded refrigerators and washer-dryers, and eating raccoons and rats. Once they have matured and settled down they prefer to become statuary, and switch to a mainly pigeon diet.

The hole, though. Where could the hole have come from? It thought about that a lot. Perhaps there were other holes like it, and one of them had been enjoying a stint as a cave when it suffered an earthquake, sectioning off a part of itself like the gap inside a geode. Perhaps it had once been a great big empty lakebed. Not a lake. If

you fill a lakebed enough, it is no longer a hole. And then perhaps it had rained a lot, and the hole shapeshifter had escaped, damaged and diminished and too frightened to remember its history, into the distance, fleeing the hated water. Maybe one of the more life-like shapeshifters had swallowed a bit of air, and failed to burp it out for so long it developed a mind of its own. Maybe one of the objective sorts had closed itself around a marshmallow in a science classroom in a middle school just like the one you went to, and sucked all the gas out of itself to make the marshmallow swell and quiver and deflate, leaving a shapeshifter-hole-type gap between belljar and goo. The hole could not remember.

Shapeshifters can persist for a very long time. There are even ordinary things that do it. Immortal jellyfish. Pyramids and all the grave-goods inside. Ancient trees and ancient arrowheads. The general idea of sharks. And these things are armed only with luck, while shapeshifters are no less likely to be lucky and much more likely to be able to evade a danger by being adaptable and clever. So, it's not too surprising, that a hole like this wouldn't know where it came from originally. Even if it had once known very clearly its exact origin, it had forgotten. Maybe while it was creating a space under a bathroom stall door that did not need one. Or killing six-sided time in a beehive, nervous not because it might be stung but because it might have honey poured into it. At some point other memories had taken precedence: how to avoid high tide and hermit crabs. Why not to imitate a trash can. Which sorts of buildings it is safe to hide in as a gap in the drywall.

Normally, this did not trouble the hole too much. Holes are not too introspective: what is the good of looking into yourself if you know full well that by your very nature there is never anything to be found there? It did not need to know its past. It had a future to worry about. It had to stay on the move, lest it fill with spiderwebs, dust, the aforementioned rain. It had learned to avoid being a tree-hollow, and picked up a phobia of owls in the process. It had learned that if it shifted, panicking, onto the encroaching owl, then the bird would

cease to trouble it, but then sooner or later it would be visited by maggots, instead. It spent more of its time being a divot, a dent, a den, a spot in need of darning, in stone pavers and wooden beams and the earth itself and your socks. Why would it matter what other hole it had cleaved off from, or what quirk of shapeshifter physiognomy had created a hole from a parent which was not a hole?

But it did think about it *sometimes*. There isn't much to do when you are a hole. Imagine it. If you became a hole, right now, a burst seam and a pocket in the stuffing in the chair beneath you, could you possibly carry on your present friendships? How many of your hobbies are accessible to holes? Would your job, whatever its protestations of fair-minded equal opportunity, perceive you as only a regrettable absence in your role - and try to fill it? And none of the nice theaters and music halls will sell a hole a ticket. So the hole's mind wandered, and it thought about where it might have come from.

It thought about other things, too. Sometimes it frightened itself, thinking about all the air that was normally in it. Why, it wondered, was it safe for a hole to be full of air, but not water? The air was not essential to its continuance. It had tried being vacuum before, not in your vacuum, but the one belonging to your neighbor four doors down. (It didn't care for it, though less because of anything to do with vacuum and more because dust and grit and cat hair went flying through it at an alarming pace.) At one point it argued itself into believing that water ought to be fine. It could be a hole in the sand, and persist in being one as the tide came in. It transpired that this was not wise of it and it hightailed up the slope of the beach, destabilizing three castles and badly startling a clam.

Sometimes the hole thought about the things in which it made its home. It wondered what floors were for, as it cozied its way between the boards and into the knotted parts of the planks. It imagined rocks must be for something, too. Was it interfering with their

purposes, when it formed a tunnel from one end of a boulder to another and had to squirm out of the way to avoid opportunistic rodents? Why did air move through it in the way it did when it was this shape, that one, here or there, in a birthday balloon, in a fan blade?

You may have gotten the impression that the hole never settled down for long, and you would be right. The longest it spent in one place was as an air pocket inside a butte in a desert, all alone. No trees trying to grow themselves bonsai style in its perch on a cliff. No snakes nesting in it. No *hermit crabs*. But it did not stay there for more than a few months. It wanted to explore and to see what else there was to see, to learn, to be a hole in.

Shapeshifters are pretty good at getting around, as a general rule. If you can change your shape, and especially your size, you can change what parts of the world contain you. This is the underlying thing that motion is. There is a bit of a trick to it, but any shapeshifter that is not still learning the introductory skills of turning from blob to pancake and back can do it: race across the country without ever moving, or indeed growing, a muscle. Sometimes they can do this fast enough to get a bit of altitude. One new to being a paper airplane might bootstrap itself as a series of alternately very tall and very short boots, gaining height and establishing new levels at which its sole hangs before stretching upward again as a stylish black leather stiletto, and with enough focus overcome the tyranny of gravity to get a forgiving falling start, for a longer tour of the sky.

The hole could not do this. That is to say, it could move. It could go from being an air pocket in the middle of the butte to being a scoop out of the west side of the butte. It could slide down the cliff-face, or even become a towering vertical crevasse, till it reached the ground, and then it could go from gopher-hole-without-a-gopher to pothole to ditch to tidepool-without-the-tide, scooting around as fast as it cared to.

But the hole could not go into the air.

It had tried occasionally when it was bored. It felt like such an excursion ought reasonably be possible: had it not managed to be the vacuum created in your neighbor's appliance? It didn't need air in it; shouldn't it be able to be a hole in the sky?

Of course, household vacuum cleaners do not allow for particularly pure vacuum. Perhaps if it was going to be a hole in the air it would have to be very thorough about it somehow, but then it would be able to whiz through the air as a sonic boom, puncturing clouds that look like castles and alarming air traffic controllers the world over.

This insight did not allow it to leap up into the air. Mostly this did not bother it. It had observed flying things, but it hadn't observed any flying things like itself that it felt like it wanted to emulate specifically. Animals flew. Objects flew. But holes didn't, and it was a hole.

Then again, it had not met any other holes that did *anything* .

Eventually, as it visited more places, found unobtrusive hiding places on boats to investigate more continents, it did grow more and more dissatisfied with this limit in its capabilities. Maybe if it were in a purer vacuum it could fuse with it. Maybe that was where all the other holes were. Perhaps it was alone because it had not yet found a way to join the hole-gestalt in which all the celestial spheres hang.

It resolved to stow away on a rocket ship.

This was ludicrously difficult. It would be hard for you, and while you're admittedly much larger and easier to see than a sneaky little hole, you are also somewhat better educated on the topic of rocket ships. The hole had no opportunity to reap the benefits your education has given you in skills applicable to traveling to space illicitly. Its first several attempts failed dismally. You probably could have told it, if you had been consulting, that it was not likely to get

off the ground as a hole in the fuel tank. Not only was this very uncomfortable for the hole once fuel started dripping out and rendering it not as empty as it liked to be, it scuttled the mission - and by the time the inspectors came along to see where the fuel had gone, the hole was elsewhere, so they could not simply repair the flaw and get on with things. Rocket ship people are far too serious and careful for that. A mysterious defect was if anything worse than something they could identify by looking. Had they been able to see the leak they might have said to themselves, ah, it was a stray bullet. Or, I see, a rivet here was not up to the standard we set. But the hole instead fled the scene and grounded the ship.

It tried again. If it did not have the educational background that might have best served it, at least it knew better than to try the same thing twice. The second rocket ship it attached itself to, as a puncture in a fin, small enough to escape notice. The ship in fact launched. But it did not reach space, and whether this was the hole's fault or not it certainly didn't know. It spiraled down into the ocean in its piece of shrapnel and narrowly escaped onto a passing branch of driftwood. Fortunately for our story not ending so ignominiously, the branch was able to carry it to shore - after many grueling weeks of vigilantly being an interior air pocket in a burl of the wood, lest a wave fill it with dreaded water.

Uncomfortably damp and much chastened, it next tried being a hole in a space suit. This scrapped no missions and killed no astronauts, but it did not get the hole into space. Astronauts prefer their space suits to have zero (0) holes in them. They are fastidious in this matter. The relevant space suit was not brought along on the next ascent.

The hole thought that perhaps it would benefit from being even smaller.

Usually it did not like to be too small. A small hole is vulnerable to things that a large one would shrug off. No hermit crab has ever

attempted to wear the entire Sydney Opera House. If it became tinier, so tiny as to be unobjectionable even to picky, choosy, fussy astronauts and their assistants? If it was a pinprick in a pair of pajamas, hidden in the lining or the label? Then a traffic jam of dust mites, or a bead of sweat, or a particularly ill-timed bend in the fabric where it made its home, could be the end of it.

By this point the hole was awfully frustrated about the whole business, though. It risked it.

This got the hole into space.

But it did not get it into vacuum.

It transpires that astronauts do not tend to wear their pajamas on space walks. At least, not just pajamas on their own, where any stowaway holes could slip out into the eternal black day of the sky. There is stuff in the way. The hole had worked out by now that the astronauts were not wearing space suits because solely because they were so comfortable and fashionable. It did not burrow out of the protective layers of the astronaut it was hitching a ride with. It glumly supervised the space walk from the pajama collar, watching but not touching the world it wanted to explore from mere inches away. The astronaut didn't even say thank you.

The mission concluded and the hole returned with everyone else to Earth.

The hole explored further spaceships. It would not be deterred by this setback.

Now, it might have occurred to you to wonder about the wisdom of the hole's plan. It had not, really, tried being pure vacuum: it had tried being thin air, and thinner air than that, but nothing so rarified. It had not tried being surrounded by more absence: it had tried being surrounded by many kinds of substance. A cleverer hole, a more timorous hole, might have ventured to one of those

aforementioned belljars and attempted to be a hole in the ill-fated marshmallow, as an experiment it could plausibly abort with an emergency exit through the apparatus if necessary. If it found a spot on the skin of the ship that would allow it to hitch-hike into the starry void, it might evaporate altogether. It had never been so big a hole. It did not have any strong theory of why this would be a pleasant outing and not a fatal one. Still, it kept trying. Part of the life-cycle of holes, perhaps. It is hard to guess if the hole had an instinctual push toward seeking the sky, if it had instincts at all, or if it was merely obsessed in the way any creature might be obsessed with anything.

Eventually, after a great deal of trial and error, the hole found a part of the ship that was thick enough that a tiny, teeny little divot was easy to mistake for an inconsequential dent or scratch. Nothing to scuttle the mission over; accelerating at high speed through the air does not do good things for a hull's complexion anyway. After the brief indignity of a buffing cloth the hole was allowed to launch, this time without any astronauts it would put in harms' way by loosing itself from the ship when the time came.

Now: I have told you that the hole was of different sizes. At times large, at times like this one very small. However, what is a "large" hole?

Most things, if we wish to compare them to one another, we measure in mass: rhinoceroses and rutabagas, tea in China and platinum cylinders in France, the Earth itself and the expected quantity of potato in your inflated bag of chips.

A hole does not have mass. It has, arguably, negative mass, in the sense that a slice of cheese bearing a hole will weigh less than one of similar dimensions sans hole. But it does not seem, does it, that the *hole itself* is bigger in a slice of cheese than in a convincing replica of gold? This even though the absent gold is considerably denser and therefore more massive, than is the absent cheese.

Volume is the intuitive way to measure a hole. It has volume, to be sure - the amount of space in the hole that you could fill up with something, if you wanted to make the hole very uncomfortable and disinclined to be cooperative. The hole did not have a fixed volume, but it had a range it had not before exceeded. When you are trying to camouflage yourself among bullet gouges in brutalist garages, or be undercover as a caterpillar-nibble in a leaf, or go unnoticed as one of a hundred potholes up and down a well-trafficked avenue, you do not get too big. Even a canyon is not too big. A borehole all the way to the center of the Earth and big enough to swallow a city would not be too big.

The hole had never been too big before.

But now it was maybe too big.

I say: *maybe*. The hole certainly, as it breached the atmosphere and felt the texture of the jubilant bouncing air molecules behind, experienced a sensation. You could call it a stretching sensation, maybe, though there is precious little mapping between a hole's experience of the world and yours. (Furthermore it had no experience with stretching. Holes are inelastic beasts: they may distort under stress, but, you will observe, this is because their surroundings stretch, not because they do so themselves.)

The hole stretched, if you will pardon the inexactness, and it stretched instantly. It did not normally change its shape instantly, taking its time choosing its path and dimensions and target every time it slid down a drainpipe or moved on from a stint within a temporarily hollow Easter bunny. But it was normally creating a space for itself where none existed. In this case, it simply - joined and possessed the space that was already there. And it was *all* already there, with no delay, no lag time in which the hole propagated at a leisurely pace. As soon as the hole touched it, the hole too was all already there.

This was uncomfortable, but only for a moment.

If the hole had come hoping for a community of like-minded - like-bodied? like- *dis* embodied? - fellow holes, it was disappointed. The hole of space, before this new arrival, appeared to have been unoccupied. Just a naturally-occurring nothingness, shaped as it was because of the way the positive space within it coalesced and swirled. No more personable than were the holes in a leaky roof or a well-loved T-shirt stubbornly held onto since middle school. No friendlier than a perforated gut or a bomb crater.

The hole found that it did not mind. It was used to being alone. If there were no other holes here, so be it. It had more to experience than it could have imagined before, even without having to suddenly invent the concept of social skills from very literally nothing. Just like when it had visited your neighbor's old Hoover, it had things inside it moving around at high speed; but it was now so tremendous (in volume, of course) as to find them barely itchy.

If there were other holes, anywhere at all, and they too made their way out of their little wells full of rocks and hermit crabs and corrugated cardboard, it would welcome them. But this is really the ultimate comfort for a hole: it was satisfied to be everywhere there wasn't anything else.

Kingdom of Plenty

The Princess of the Kingdom of Plenty wore silk.

The insects that made the silk were tended by peasants who wore linen, or wool, or fur. The princess sometimes wore those too, when they were the most comfortable option for the season or created the sort of silhouette she wanted to present. But she was the only one who wore silk, the only one who slept on silk.

She ate savory roasts and fine herbs and spun sugar. These, a few other people ate. It wasn't very plentiful to have one person at a meal eat something different from everyone else, or to have the Princess eat alone in her room. Besides, if you were going to butcher a pig, it would yield more meat than the Princess could eat by herself. If you were going to send sailors on a voyage to a distant island for beets and dried exotic fruits to render into desserts, you might as well fill up the cargo hold. So the Princess's banquets included not only herself but also the nurses who'd brought her up, the playmates she'd been close to since childhood, the court astrologer, the friends she'd picked up at her parties and dances.

The Princess of the Kingdom of Plenty threw a lot of dances. Everyone was invited to these. Dances weren't a luxury, they were open to anyone who could move and even some of the peasantry who couldn't; the Princess herself would scoop up little children with rickets and spin them around the floor sometimes. The court astrologer was old and feeble but he saved up his energy for the gala balls and kicked up his heels with the head cook. The Princess loved dances best of all.

One day, the Princess asked the astrologer, "Why do little children have rickets?"

The astrologer stroked his beard. "It is a deficiency of the blood, in peasants who do not drink enough milk, or work in the dark mining salt or iron."

"Can I fix it?" asked the Princess. "I have milk whenever I want it. I want it for the children."

The astrologer shook his head. "You have milk whenever you want it, enough to fill one stomach, or even the stomachs of all your friends. The kingdom contains many hundreds of children. To give them all milk the peasants would need more goats, and more land to graze them on."

The Princess furrowed her brow, but she did not in fact have goats, or land to graze more than one or two of them on.

She threw another ball, and the great ballroom overflowed into the palace gardens where they stood full of fragrant roses and heavy-boughed pear trees. Her people spun, hand in hand, in rings and ribbons around the orchard; they rested their feet and sang, sitting on the benches among the flowers. The Princess danced with a woman she'd seen just the previous week with a baby on her back. "Where is the little one?" asked the Princess.

The woman shook her head. "This one didn't make it," she said. "Please, I'm here to think of anything else -"

So the Princess asked her nothing more, just danced and passed her on to another partner, but later, she asked the court astrologer, "Why do little babies die?"

"Most often, it is because of an impurity in the water," replied the astrologer, twirling the end of his beard around his fingers. "Causing a sickness that a healthy adult will often survive, but a fragile infant likely cannot."

"Can I fix it?" asked the Princess. "I have clean water, as much as I need. I need it for the babies."

The astrologer shook his head. "You have water for all your needs, enough to slake one thirst, or even those of all your friends. The kingdom contains many hundreds of babies. To give them all pure water the peasants would need more wells, dug deep and built solid."

The Princess frowned, but she did not know how to dig a well.

The next time the Princess had a banquet, one of her old nurses who'd played with her as a little child, kissing her scraped knees and brushing out her long hair to put it in plaits, was not there at all.

This time the astrologer could guess, before the Princess even asked, what had troubled her. "My dear," said he, "I could tell you what troubled the poor woman, what made her fall ill with the flu instead of with malaria, what made it strike now and not last year - but on the whole, people do not die because they get some specific malady at some specific time. It's no more the fault of the flu than any one oat is responsible for your breakfast, or any one star creates the constellations. If it were not the flu, it would be something else. There are many things that people can die of. Curing the flu would be a great accomplishment, if it were in your power. It would not allow anyone to live to be even twice my age, let alone forever. Not even you, Princess, though were it possible to protect you we would surely do so. And why this should be, even I do not know."

The Princess retired for the night to her chambers. She paced in her silken slippers; she sipped sweetened tea. She looked out the window at the mountain valley that was her kingdom, the streams and the meadows, the farms and the villages, the swathes of green where mulberry trees for the silkworms rustled in the wind.

The next morning she was up with the dawn. She marched straight to the astrologer's rooms, not too far from hers in the palace.

"Astrologer," she said, while he rubbed sleep from his eyes. "I don't want the peasants to make me silk clothes any more. I can wear linen and wool and fur like everyone else, when what I have now has worn out. I want them to dig wells, instead."

"Princess, the peasants who farm the silkworms are not the same peasants who know how to dig wells," said the astrologer, though there was a bit of a smile behind his beard.

"Then I want the ones who farm the silkworms to mind the well-diggers' children, or cook their supper, or bring them baskets of mulberries, or haul away the dirt dug out of the well holes, and all the while look on so they can learn how to do it themselves."

"That is a better idea," said the astrologer. "But when all the wells are dug, what then?"

"Then more babies will grow up, and they will need water for their own babies. We'll need more wells forever."

"I see," said the astrologer. "I will think about how best to arrange this for you, Princess."

She nodded, and went down to the ballroom to meet her dancing instructor.

The next morning she was back. The astrologer yawned hugely as he answered his door to her knock, but smiled to see her. "Princess."

"Astrologer, I don't want the peasants to fix me and my friends pork roasts so often any more. That's so many pigs, even if we do share them. I want them to raise goats instead, and give the milk to their children. I can eat porridge and eggs and beans like everyone else."

"Princess," said the astrologer, "goats and pigs eat different things. While goats want grass and browsings, pigs will eat scraps and

spoilage. Somewhat fewer pigs could allow somewhat more goats, but to switch entirely from one to the other, that's difficult indeed."

"Then I want the peasants to share the pork among themselves, and to have *some* more goats than they have right now," she said.

"And once everyone has the milk they want, what then, Princess?"

"Then more of their children will grow up strong enough to farm, and they will have plenty of work feeding all the goats and all the pigs too," she said, "till everyone's belly is full."

"I will consider how best your will can be done, Princess," said the astrologer.

She nodded and swept off to her singing lesson.

The following morning, she was back again.

"Astrologer," she said, while he blinked at her from under his bushy eyebrows and combed a tangle out of his beard, "I have thought and thought and thought about it, and I cannot think of a single thing I could give up that would cure the flu. I could give up my gardens, but my roses can't save anyone from illness. I could tear down my palace, but the stones wouldn't help at all. I could do all kinds of things that would take away parts of my life that bring me comfort and joy, and not a single one of those things would make the least bit of difference. Am I wrong? Is there anything I can do?"

The astrologer looked at her, a little proudly, a little sadly. "You are not wrong," he said. "There is nothing you can tear out of your garden, your wardrobe, your home, that will achieve this feat."

She bit her lip. "Astrologer, you don't sound quite as though that were the end of it."

"In the Kingdom of Plenty," he said, "there is a deep magic woven. A deep magic that may let you achieve some of your wishes."

"Some?" asked the Princess.

"Some. It is deep, but it is slow, terribly slow."

"Tell me."

"If," said the astrologer, "a great deal of luxury is gathered into one place, not just food but sugar, not just clothes but silk, not just rest but frivolity, it is a bit different. You cannot drink mist. The Kingdom of Plenty cannot drink poverty. But you can drink water, and it can drink wealth."

"How can the Kingdom drink wealth?" demanded the Princess.

"Let me tell you a story," said the astrologer, and the Princess sat down on his old armchair and folded her arms to listen.

"Many, many years ago," (began the astrologer), "people lived almost like wild beasts. They did not farm, but ate what they found. They did not weave, but wore the skins of their prey as blankets against the cold night. They did not dig wells, but went thirsty when there was not enough rain to feed the rivers. This way to live was not wicked, nor even very much more of a hardship than it is to be a peasant. But one day, we do not know precisely when or how, their ways began to change. They learned new ways to find what they needed, and they learned more about what it was that they needed, in the same way we have learned what causes rickets and what makes water impure.

"They worked much harder, and this work itself hurt them, but they began to see what more there could be. A peasant with a cellar full of grain is not better fed than a beast with a belly full of berries. But the peasant can imagine: what if this cellar were deeper and the sacks more numerous? What if the mice never came to my

storeroom? What if I could keep meat the way I keep wheat? And this imagination is key. These things that the peasant has the power to want are essential to the magic. This is enough wealth to drink, but only a little sip, only enough to tantalize.

"There are two ways that a kingdom can be. Well, really there are countless ways, but consider these two. First, the peasant can imagine having twice as much of what he has, and go to his neighbor and strike him with his threshing scythe, and take everything in that cellar too. This makes one peasant a little richer. It makes the kingdom poorer. There is twice as much grain per peasant in that year, but at the next harvest there are half as many workers, if this is how the people of the kingdom treat one another. And anyone who fears his neighbor's hoe or flail will turn on him next will not plant as much; he will put a bar on his door, he will pretend to everyone that he has nothing in the larder, he will flee to the kingdom next door if he knows the way.

"The second way is that they can refuse to do this.

"How does the second kingdom let any of the peasants get what he imagines, you might ask," (the astrologer went on). "He has a sip of wealth, just enough to dream of what it would be like to gulp down a whole basinful. How will he ever get more than that? And this is the magic of the Kingdom of Plenty. One peasant cannot put a whole basinful together. But many of them can. As the wild beast is to the peasant farmer, the peasant farmer is to -"

"The Princess," whispered the Princess.

"That's right. But the magic cannot work, if your people come to the palace door with their pitchforks and spades. This would spread all your wealth into mist. If every peasant took an equal piece of the silk in your sheets they'd have worthless scraps. If every peasant took an equal share of your banquet into their stewpots they would scarcely taste the difference. It's different, when it's all together. And

it's different, when you choose what to do with the magic you have been building all your life, of your own free will. Sometimes - some princes, some princesses, choose not to use it. This is their right. Princes and princesses like you enjoy the power you are hoping to wield now only because this is their right. It was a prince like you who gave us the ships that sail to faraway shores, not so long ago."

"What must I do?" she asked, a set of determination in her jaw.

"What do you want?" asked the astrologer. "You cannot have everything. The magic is slow. It is ponderous. It is getting faster, but it is doing it little by little. I cannot imagine how many generations lie before us before our successors have laid enough magic atop magic atop magic to have even become capable of imagining the end of death."

The Princess looked at her hands. "I want the wells," she decided, after thought. "I want everyone in the Kingdom of Plenty to have a clean well of pure water to drink."

"This you can do," said the astrologer. "Come with me."

The astrologer took her to a deep underground room of the palace that she had never been to before, where there was a great magical ledger she had not known existed. It wrote in itself, debit and credit, in spidery handwriting barely legible: so much spent on wood for a fence, so much earned selling eggs at the market, so much saved and so much lent and so much found between the couch cushions, in black and red and blue and green.

In royal purple, it listed taxes rendered to the Crown. This much silk, this much pork, some work in the garden and some work in the kitchen.

The Princess watched in wonder as it marked every grain of sugar and every broom-pass a maid made across the ballroom.

"Princess," said the astrologer. "It says here that you are very rich. You have told me what you would like to buy."

And he handed her a pen, full of ink in lustrous gold, and she took it up. It hummed between her fingers.

She wrote, on the waiting parchment of the infinite ledger: *for wells throughout the Kingdom*, and the pen went on of its own accord, tearing itself from her hand and scratching out what she owed in exchange.

When it was done, the Princess's silk was still fine, her pantry still full of ham for her breakfast and sugar for her toast. But there was one thing new in the Kingdom.

She and the astrologer looked out of the window of the highest tower in the palace, watching the peasants come out of their houses and dance for joy, pulling up buckets of water from their wells, singing the praises of the Princess.

"What's next?" she asked.

"Who is next," the astrologer said gently.

"...yes," said the Princess. "Who is next."

"That is up to you, Princess."

The Princess threw a ball. Everyone was invited. The peasants, joyous and many, bowed and whirled and promenaded, glowing already with better health and comfort. The Princess danced with them all, linking elbows with widows and clasping hands with farmhands and scooping up every child she saw.

By the end of the ball, a little Prince, who had toddled of his own accord to the festivities quite alone, was installed in the palace nursery, with nurses engaged for his care and silken clothes in his

size laid out to soothe his chapped skin. He joined the banquet, squealing with delight at the pudding that came after the main course, too small to wonder much at his luck.

The Princess tucked the Prince into bed under his silken sheets, and read him a story out of a beautifully illuminated book.

And then she went to the astrologer's quarters. He was collecting his effects into a traveling trunk.

"Where will you go?" she asked him.

"I think perhaps it's time I saw some of those distant islands my ships have been traveling to," he said, patting her on the shoulder.

"Will you ever come home?"

"Maybe. On the high seas it is a bit of a gamble. But I am growing old, and we are not rich enough that I can be saved for a much longer life anyway," he replied, smiling gently. "So you'd best read all my books, and write a few, to be sure everything is well with the Kingdom of Plenty."

"I will," said the court astrologer.

Colonist

I hit the ground and start running for my career.

I mean, sort of I'm running for my life, but I don't have a life after this either way, and I do have a career.

I promised myself I wouldn't start waxing philosophical during exams.

I vault a low shrub. Bad move, now my left hand that I used to push off is full of prickles and they sting like anything. Would it have made sense to focus more on maneuvering that didn't rely on touching environmental hazards? No, I shouldn't think about that. I'll figure out training regimen tweaks later after I die, no point right now. I'll do without the hand. I keep running.

I realize I completely forgot to smile for the camera when I go to ground in a rocky alcove and take a breather. Nothing says that a rock can't poison you, but it's at least less likely to try it than a plant, and ostensibly you're not penalized for taking rests as long as your overall time and performance are good. Ostensibly. There's no law that says they have to publish all their criteria. I smile.

I tweeze a few prickles out of my hand with my multi-knife. It doesn't make it hurt less at rest, but it does make it less likely to brush against my leg or something and make me regret it. Some of them are in too deep to tweeze, but it's not like I'm going to need my hand ever again if it can get me through today. Do they worry about that, I wonder. Or is having a real job just as much of a meat grinder and they don't care if their new hires are all the type to wreck themselves trying to achieve their quarterly objectives? It's not like more of us are very hard to come by.

Maybe I should just go on the dole.

No, nope, that's how they get you, a few plant spines in your hand and you start thinking like a useless bluesy gamer. I can do this. I've got to do this. I'm going to space. I'm going to make it.

I give up on the last few spines, spit on the wounds in case that dilutes the poison or something - it doesn't - and run some more.

I watch myself get utterly creamed by a mocked-up dinosaur standing in for the kind of thing that space colonies sometimes have running around. Some of them don't, but I'm majoring in Wildlife. I like it, just conceptually - it can't all be dinosaurs, there's got to be something worth domesticating out there - and there's slightly less competition than in the safer fields like Mining or Infrastructure or Generation. Ultimately, of course, if a mining major gets offered a slot on a ship to Jurassic Park they'll take it, and if I get a berth on a generation ship I'll grit my teeth grinning and raise sixteen babies from the gene bank, but you have better odds if you indicate a passion for something and stick to it. I'd rather be eaten by a dinosaur - or, no, it's not even eating me, it's just sort of stepping on me and roaring, great - anyway, it's a better death than a mine cave-in or an engine failure in intergalactic space.

"Better luck next time," says my boyfriend Marco. He's a Space Station guy, so it's not a long term thing unless by some crazy lottery ticket miracle we get placed together anyway, but you have to bust stress somehow. Even if I dated another Wildlife major it's not the sort of thing you can count on. Life doesn't really begin till you graduate.

"This isn't about luck," I tell him.

"Sure it is, if that beastie hadn't -"

"I mean, luck is involved, but good students win and the best students win a lot, and I'm not the best, and I need to be the best." I'm up and pacing now; some of the meds I'm on are great for getting plenty of exercise in but also leave me with nervous energy when I'm just trying to watch myself get trampled to death. "I should be putting more time toward my athletics."

"Or you should be getting sleep."

"I don't think the dinosaur stepped on me because I yawned. No, Wildlife is a pretty physical track, and if colony scouts see this kind of thing," I gesture at the splash screen that has stilled on my zoomed-in death throes, "they're not going to want me. It's too late to change majors -"

"No it isn't, you have until next fall."

"It's too late to *effectively* change majors. Sure, they'll graduate me if I switch into something soft like Generation -"

"Hey, Generation folks work hard as fuck."

"I know it's not *easy* but it's not *complicated*, they just need to not mutiny or fuck up their kids - don't interrupt me, I know 'just' is a belittling word but I'm indicating that there are only two things on that list - anyway. I should be running and jumping and climbing trees more and reading about xenobiology less. It's not like they'll have anything in the books about whatever I'll be dealing with."

"You don't think you'd get second wave?"

"I guess I might get second wave. Or third, depending on conditions when I graduate." I run my fingers through my hair.

"My grandma says they'll have good-enough robots by the time we graduate," he remarks, looking out the dorm window.

"They've been saying that since she was born. Good-enough robots are always fifteen to twenty years away, two years for optimists. Boots on planets, feet in boots," I say. "I've got feet. They just have to be good feet."

"You have good feet," he says. Well, I don't date him because he's good at giving me constructive feedback on how to get boots on. I just think he's pretty. I shut him up with a kiss and spend the next while de-stressing so I'll be able to sleep tonight at all.

I spend my midterm fighting off space bats from a farm. The bats die when they eat the crops, they can't digest Earth proteins, but they're dumb as rocks and it doesn't stop them from trying even when the corpses are shoveled into great cautionary piles. They aren't frightened by scarecrows because they aren't frightened by humans at all. It takes me a long time and a lot of chunks taken out of my arms by space bats before I figure out by trial and error something that will fend them off, and then I get a B- because my solution wouldn't scale well to enough farms to supply a colony with the materials provided in the simulation. A student majoring in Medical gets to take her patient rapport for a spin on my bites. Her voice is steady in my earpiece, telling me what to grab from my supplies and how to make the knots she recommends. When she's walked me through what to do to clean the wounds and wrap them up, and the proctor's had a chance to look her work over, I die.

History is still required. There's a lot of "when will we use this in real life" in all our classes - part of why robots are not and will never be good enough is that they have to be programmed for specific conditions and we don't know what the conditions are in advance. I am not going to meet stomp dinosaurs or idiot bats; whoever had that privilege has probably been settled on their planet for decades now if it's made it into the curriculum. But history is nonsense to have on the requirements list. Math, sure, maybe we'll need it when

we're engineering domes in the Sagittarius Arm, science, absolutely, hit me with the firehose, all the phys ed is essential to weed out anyone who'll collapse in a spacesuit or can't build the stamina for manual labor. We have to prove to the colony pickers that we have what it takes. I'll even tolerate art, if more for mental health reasons than practicality. But history?

The history teacher of course disagrees. Presumably you have to be incredibly passionate about history to wind up teaching it when you don't have what it takes to go to space and could be playing video games on the dole. I don't know how you wind up with a passion like that on this planet, but this guy managed it. Maybe he likes the history kind of video games, there must be some. I don't know, I never play.

Anyway, I attend my required history course. I need the GPA and the attendance record and the compliance score even if I don't need the information. He rambles on about pre-diaspora and makes us write essays about Earth and about the colony's foundation and stuff like that. We get to pick any topic we want for our final paper. It has to be five pages long, which might not sound like much but I do need to pull an A on it and I have a lot of other stuff on my plate.

I have, in addition to a boyfriend, a study buddy. Flora. She's in Logistics/Ops. We sit across from each other at a table and if one of us swears the other mumbles sympathetically. Closer to exams we quiz each other. I swear enough trying to settle on an essay topic that she actually looks up.

"What's eating you?"

"Space bats. No, it's the free-topic essay in history. I need something I can work out a thesis for while I'm on the track, or maybe figure out in the waterworld simulation and report to myself from there, except I can't count on downtime in the waterworld to tell myself anything." I look at an astrogation flashcard and flip it over. I'm not

good at astrogation. If I were good at astrogation I'd be home free, almost nobody can both navigate a ship and also be a remotely functional human being. The combination might get me a choice of more than one ship.

"Can't you just ask your parents to tell you a story about landing, or something?"

"I only have one, and no, she's got my sibs to worry about." We're none of us biologically related; I'm from the embryo bank and so are they. I believe a lot of families manage to look past that but my mom finds it an impediment. She was fine, helpful even when it was clear I might have the potential to make something of myself, but not the tell-me-a-story kind of mom. I wasn't hugged enough as a child. She made me stop chasing down my little siblings to hug them after one turned out to have gotten into the butter and I dropped him. "Besides," I say, "that isn't a thesis statement, 'here's a story about landing', is it."

"Wow, ass."

"Mega ass." I turn the page in my index of the timeline of the history of the universe. "Think he'll buy me speculating wildly about the precursors? I can speculate wildly about the precursors while I'm doing hurdles and then vom it onto the page later."

"How close are you cutting it in History?"

"Not *too* ."

"Maybe ask him? I mean, don't say it's going to be vom."

"Right."

I stay after the next meeting of history class. I ask him if it would be acceptable to write my paper on what we know about the precursors. He says it might be hard to find sources but I'm welcome

to try. Which makes me think he's expecting something non-vom. With sources. Dreadful. I ask him if there's a minimum number of citations - like, for crying out loud, it's only five pages - and he says "not numerically speaking". I don't know what that means. Probably "no but don't think that means you can quarter-ass this and get your A".

I spend the next hour on the track. My next simulation is tonight, so I can't push too hard - if I'm exhausted that'll get copied in with the rest of my physical condition. But I can run and jump and do the obstacle course for a while, composing sentences in my head. The Precursors were - or the Precursors are? We don't know if they're actually dead or anything. The Precursors left a network of portals throughout the - hm. My schedule alarm goes off. I hose myself down in the high pressure shower, and take a power nap to freshen up before I prepare to die again.

The next morning I watch the recording of myself trying to tame wild space horses. I do all right, actually. I don't even get kicked in the head. The pickers had better appreciate me. I didn't have time to breed the space horses for docility but in the time given I think I was doing well.

I eat breakfast with Marco. He looks preoccupied.

"What's eating you?" I ask.

"Micrometeoroids," he says. "Listen - I'm thinking about dropping out."

I stare at him. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I don't know that this is really what I want to do with my life. Like - someone has to, but if one guy drops out that just means someone else gets the spot, right? It'll get done."

"So you're going to go on the *dole*?" I ask incredulously. "You're just going to go be nobody? Marco, I can't believe you, I can't believe you're even thinking it -"

"I haven't decided for sure," he mumbles. "But what do I need with a spot on a space station, really - I don't think I'd *like* it. All my simulations look so miserable and they're starting to sometimes flag halfway through or ask to be killed early. I don't want that to be my whole life."

"So you want your whole life to be video games and waiting for somebody else's boots to hit all the new metal and all the new soil?" I say. "Why would you want that? You might as well, like, die."

"I die a lot," he said to his plate. "You do too."

"Dying's only bad because you're not alive afterwards!" I scoff.

"My brother's on the *dole*," says Marco. "He ate something native in the garden as a kid, couldn't make it into school - not even Support tracks, let alone colony ones. The video games thing is kind of rude -"

"So you've eaten a bad plant and decided to join him," I snarl. "Good luck with that."

"You're so - you're *vicious*," he says. "Why did I ever put up with you?"

"I know why I put up with you, and it wasn't worth it. Go. Go be nobody."

He goes. He used to bus my tray for me. He doesn't this time. But I'll save more time by not having a boyfriend than I'll lose by having to carry my own dishes.

The history teacher announces that due to popular demand we can choose to do our assignments as presentations instead of essays and deliver them in simulation. It's a real time-saver. I sign up for a slot and I read about the Precursors while I'm on the stationary bike. I'm not great at presentations, but I'm not good at essays either and if I read enough I'll probably be able to pull something together. My book is going for a weird spooky mystical angle on the Precursors, like they were some kind of magical beings or something, so I swap it for a different book.

The Precursors are the folks who left the portals. We're pretty sure for various reasons that they're artificial, not some kind of natural wormhole situation. They make colonization feasible - you still need generation ships to settle some sites but you can cut down the number of generations a lot if you go through the right gates. And the Precursors settled a lot of planets and left a lot of ruins. There is so much Precursor technology and so many artifacts left on nearly every rock in the system. And it's a good thing they breathed oxygen (or possibly breathed nitrogen but their plants breathed oxygen or something) because we need to find it all, and we need to figure out what the heck it all means, because the portals don't look like they're going to last forever.

Probably they just built them for themselves and didn't care if they lasted without maintenance for the million years it's been since then. I wouldn't care about that if I were building myself a portal. So it needs charging every fifteen million years, whatever, I'll go back and do that when it's been fifteen million years and if I'm not around to patch it up I'm not around to be fussed if they fail. Or if they blow up. Lotta people think they're gonna blow up. Like, really bad blowing up. FTL shrapnel in every direction blowing up. I fish out an estimate about how old Earth would fare if that happened because I figure that's the way to a history professor's heart. All those continents in those specific shapes or whatever it is that he's attached to will, apparently, in the event of a portal explosion event that affects anything in the neighborhood (and there are like forty

portals in the neighborhood), be sublimated into plasma slag. This would be terrible for both of history and also things normal people care about like not being dead.

Apparently some folks think the Precursors left their colonies for some reason but are still around and will come sailing out of the Sombrero Galaxy or something to make sure that doesn't happen. I reckon they don't care. Why would they? They didn't know we existed. We probably didn't exist, when they were bopping from constellation to constellation building stuff and having Precursor babies to crew Precursor generation ships. We were just wildlife back then. The kind of thing I'm going to be devising protocols to deal with while the Archaeology majors unearth all their weird doodads and informative garbage and indecipherable probably-it's-writing-but-who-knows-since-they-were-aliens. The kind of thing I'm going to be taming and domesticating and turning into coats to make every useful person's lives easier on my colony.

That's enough ruminating to extemporize something passable when I go give my history presentation. I make sure I'm thinking about it when I go to sleep - I don't think it really helps but it soothes some of the pre-test nerves.

I deliver my presentation to the camera. My history teacher can't come to me and I can't go to him.

Man, was I that lousy in bed? That Marco would rather just never -

Even if that line of thought were useful to me it wouldn't be useful to me here. I'll just have to hope that I think of it on the outside too.

I conclude my presentation and confirm that it submitted correctly and I die.

After finals the colony pickers come by. I'm not old enough to get a slot yet, they have to be sure I'm not going to burn out or lose a limb or something in the next year before they bet hard on me, but it's not too early to put in a good showing and be memorable for next year. Everybody does a sort of expo thing. I show off my sim recording of the history presentation - I got an A, and it's good to show off you're well-rounded - on top of my best-of with my in-major courses and of course all the fallback material on construction and maintenance and child development, in case some disaster takes out two-thirds of my ship and I have to wrangle space bats while wearing twins on my back and patching holes in the water system. It's not an appealing prospect but it's better than playing video games forever. I'm going to be a colonist.

I fuck one of the pickers. It's not supposed to happen, but nobody enforces that. I put on a convincing enough pout about my boyfriend dumping me and me needing my stress relief that the guy doesn't feel like he's being outright bribed, and if he responsibly ignores it when I graduate then I'm at least no worse off and if he remembers me fondly then that can't hurt. Besides, I really do need to unwind. I tried Flora but she said no.

Marco hasn't actually dropped out yet. He's at the expo with everyone else showing off his skills at managing hydroponics. Some of the sites we need to do archaeology on have higher gravity than humans can put up with - at least, put up with sustainedly while doing anything useful. We have robots that can manage that, just not robots that can do that and also make choices, so somebody has to hang out in a space station piloting them from the sky, and somebody has to make the space station keep working and make anybody on the space station who breathes still able to do that so they can keep handling all the maintenance.

Maybe he was never really going to drop out and he was just venting in a kind of stupid way. Maybe we could've remained a thing till graduation.

No sense worrying about it now.

One of the pickers - not the one I boinked, his colleague of some kind - says I have grit. It's a good compliment. I beam at her and ask her if she has recommendations from the course catalog for my skillset and take everything she says down very carefully.

Afterwards I treat myself to a big pile of desserts and working on my art project, which hasn't been graded yet because that teacher's really slow. The art project will probably already score as well as I need, but working on it is soothing. Besides, I won't see my next choice of who to hit on till Lab Protocols 2 meets. Art's the next best thing. I'm doing a great big abstract and it's not hard to expand the virtual canvas to just keep going. I never do this in sim. I'm not time crunched enough to need to and I don't get to keep any of the soothed-ness if I die after adding more streaks of gold and swirls of blue.

I sign up for my next raft of classes. Nonlethal Wildlife Takedowns, Orienteering And Camping, Ecosystem Management, Xenogenetics. The required Archaeology Basics that is finally offered at a time I have open. Welding As Art, credit in two departments at once. Nutrition And Health. Concepts of Robotics. A course on Maintaining Working Relationships. You'd think I'd need that given the breakup but nobody on a colony ship with me is going to be the kind of person who'd drop out of a good school to go on the dole when he isn't even flunking. Still, you don't want everybody snarling at each other and running into total psychological shutdown at the prospect of collaborating, not on the ship and not once boots hit ground. There's probably something else that'd be that contemptible and set me off that badly, I just haven't run into it yet.

It's a heavy courseload but I handled worse in my first year. And the pickers are only going to grab the folks with minimum accumulated credits after they've assigned the ones who go above and beyond.

I lasso a space cow, or try to - got it. They're not edible but they have industrially useful not-technically-blood. Potentially cheaper than synthesizing the equivalent, says my briefing, and it could even be an export if we got enough of them in stables hooked up to some kind of not-technically-bloodsucking machine. This class gets really elaborate with the briefings. Does it matter why I need to nonlethally lasso the space cow? Does it affect things if I do it because somebody told me to and not because I have been brought up to date on industrial vampirism? I wonder about this but I don't make the curricular calls. Maybe I can streamline things when I retire, if I wind up in academia then. But first I apply hobbles to the space cow's wheels and then I die.

The guy in Lab Protocols 2 is down to hook up. He's actually way better in the sack than Marco was. He gets his hands all over me, gets his mouth all over me, squeezes me like he's trying to press me into cider. It's so good I let him stay the night, curled up against me, nuzzling my neck. He mumbles when he's sleepy. I think I hear something about it being good to get this sort of thing out our systems while we still can? I pretend not to understand. I don't want to wreck another relationship or whatever it is arguing about how long I'll be able to show him a good time. I can't keep him after graduation most likely anyway, so if he thinks he's not going to make it, that's not really any skin off my nose. Me, though. I'm going to space.

Apparently I have a pop quiz on shipboard emergency protocols. In this simulation I'm the only living passenger in my entire sealed deck. Of course I am, but they included a lot of bodies and I feel that was unnecessary, they could have said they were vented into the void. I stabilize everything I can reach, and coordinate with the video calls between decks, and sustain pretty serious burns to both arms and keep going anyway, and by the time it's safe to open the

bulkheads I'm running on fumes and emergency stimulant tabs but I think I'll get an A, and then I die.

Mock Ship is the only extracurricular besides gym type stuff that matters at all. The Generation folks have to expect to live out their whole lifespans on a ship, so they have coursework on it, but it's not like a three-year voyage with a couple portal shortcuts is as easy as life on an established colony like this one. Pickers like you to have a mock ship and good reviews from your shipmates. My mock ship, the *Wild Oats*, meets once a week, which is already a lot of concession to convenience - my real ship will have me locked in a can with the same few hundred bodies for a very, very long time.

I spend a lot of my hours on the *Wild Oats* studying for other classes. It's not all drills for catastrophic system failure like that gnarly-looking quiz I had last night. Much of our flight will be spent skilling up, checking up on completely accurate and entirely routine computer behaviors, staying in condition. The mock ship is supposed to simulate the inevitable social drama, and there's lots, but staying out of it is a perfectly good way to get a "good shipmate" rating from everybody with you.

Today somebody's having a crisis over her dad retiring. I can't really relate, but I pat her shoulder and when there's a chance to volunteer to get her a cup of water I take it. It's not a realistic source of ship conflict, any more than I expect to be reading up on Archaeology Basics in flight - it's not like you ever get to hug your dad again after you blast off whether he's retired or not. But there'll be something and it's practice for whatever it turns out there'll be.

On the way back to my room from the mock ship meeting I get an alert. Finals have been over long enough that they've finally got the class rankings published. I'm thirty-ninth, which is good. It's great, actually; usually something like the top five hundred in the school manage to get a placement. The top half of those get the choice

colony ship roles, the next two-fifty wind up on second wave supplements to colonies that hit hard times or they get slots on trading and messenger vessels. Below that you have support roles on-planet, and some days I think that might be good enough for me, I could see myself in the shipyard or the farm sector... But I'm thirty-ninth, I'm good. I caught a rumor to the effect that this might be an unusually thin year, but thirty-nine is enough. In the end me and the valedictorian might literally be on the same boat.

I don't know why it would be a thin year. The Precursors went all *over* the place. By the latest estimates to come into this system we've touched fewer than ten percent of their worlds - humanity in general, not just offshoots from this colony and this school - and any one of them might have the clue to re-upping the portals. Sure, exponentiation is a thing and maybe we'll have it all mopped up by the time I'm old and creaky and thinking about retiring, just by multiplying a few more times, but that's decades away. Rumors are wrong as often as not, and that's probably all it is.

I go track down my stressbuster buddy and approximately jump him - that's the right way to deal with a baseless yet niggling rumor - and we try to climb inside each other's skin. I look for him on the rankings later and he's in the four hundreds. That's fine. I'm not too good to fuck a four hundreds guy.

I catch space fireflies in a net.

I don't know if I've ever wanted to keep a simulated experience before. It's not the kind of thing I tell myself. I'm not going to go, hey, bio-self, this was great, I want to carry this memory forward, only to then die anyway and leave myself with a hefty dose of the creeps. Maybe I feel like this every time I don't wind up as a bloody smear on the simulated space rock where I expire. Maybe I feel like this even then. I'm not going to tell.

The fireflies glint beautifully. They don't bite me. They aren't poisonous unless I eat them. I have to swish the net gently so I don't foul up their lacy little wings. It's twilight and twin suns are setting in the west; the sky looks like my painting from my last art class.

I don't want to die.

I do anyway.

In Ecosystem Management, halfway through a lecture on Precursor animals and their feralized descendants, half the students have alerts go off within thirty minutes of each other. The first few ignore them. The eighth student ducks into the corridor to take the call. When he comes back with his face as bloodless as a block of wood we know it's big - if it were personal he wouldn't have come back and if it were tiny he wouldn't look like that. I saw that kid's Orienteering final last year and he's unflappable. The class kind of stops after that. The teacher doesn't even scold people for looking at their messages. I don't get any, but I'm sitting next to Flora - Logistics/Ops folks need to be well-rounded - and she does. I look over her shoulder. It can't be too private if it affects this many people, and she doesn't pull away from me.

Flora's sister, who shipped out after graduating last month and hasn't hit the portal yet, has sent her just this:

We're turning around. Don't let Mama turn my room into a sewing room.

There is no way that half the students in this one class had a family member on that specific ship. No way. Ships usually pull people from all the schools in the whole system. They train together for a while on the ship itself and then they take off once all the rough edges are located and sanded down.

So it has to be something bigger than that, something that is *causing* a ship to turn around. That had never happened in my lifetime, possibly the entire history of the colony.

I turn toward the guy on my other side. His screen says:

Probably time to stop killing yourself in school, kiddo. More later

"What *happened*?" I say out loud, and I'm not the only one saying something like it. It's pretty obvious how big a deal this has to be. Someone in the room has to have more than a cryptic update, vague advice -

"We're not using portals anymore," somebody in the third row says.

" *What*?"

The same kid goes on, voice trembling like he's about to start crying, "They think - that using them - is making them decay faster - so we have to stop. Essential trade and messages only."

"Who's *they*?" I scream, but no one hears me, and it doesn't matter anyway.

Even a generation ship can't make it to a new colony in a remotely useful amount of time without any gates at all. You can set up a generation ship to take off with one set of people and land with their grandkids aboard ready to put boots on the planet and go, but you can't rely on that if you need it to be their great, great, great, great, great grandkids, and those are the kind of distances we're talking about if you have to get from point A to point B as the vacuum-going crow flies. There's no perfectly lossless recycling process, nothing that robust to disasters, no social protocol that can be relied upon to keep a little society on-mission and self-perpetuating that long. We can't land on any new colonies that nobody's already flying to right now - already flying to through the portals they need to hit,

moreover, though I guess some folks midway through their journey won't get the message till they land.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. There's nowhere to go and nothing to do with the rest of my life. I'm not a physicist, I'm terrible at all the linguistic nonsense the archaeologists do to decipher inscriptions, I can't help - I can raise kids, but why would we need people to raise any more kids than they happen to find recreationally appealing if there's nowhere they need to go and nothing they need to prepare to be able to do? What will become of me? What will become of anyone? I don't want to play video games.

Farming industry. It'll have to be that, I'm a wildlife major. This planet doesn't have as many animals as some of them but there are any. And they raise pigs and stuff. I don't have to die, I don't have to go into simulation forever and shuffle off the mortal coil.

"The mission to C5-110K will go on as planned with some delay, due to unusually promising intelligence about the quality of the dig sites on the surface -"

I sit up straight.

"- with candidates selected from across all current pupils of all years, throughout the system."

I'm thirty-ninth. In my year. In my school. According to an aggregate ranking that assumes a standard planet distribution and not anything specific to C5-110K. I'm probably something like the two thousandth best in the system across all the years of colony-candidate students. Which was fine, when a new ship rolled off the yard at least once a year!

I could work shipyard. Shipyard would be fine. No, fuck, they're going to wind up shutting down the shipyard. Farms though. Who's even going to eat still? Anything. Anything.

"Classes are cancelled for the rest of the day," says the professor.

That's bad. What if not all the other schools out there are doing the same thing, and I have a gap in my record, when they pick people for that one single ship? I don't have a great shot at it but if C5-110K is wildlife-heavy I could maybe get in just on colony balance reasons. Or personality fit, if they have a superstar astrogation specialist who's really picky. I don't actually get along great with the kinds of people who do well at astrogation but I could learn. Could I learn fast enough? When are they crewing the ship? Probably not for years, if they're letting the younger cohort catch up to be counted in. Maybe I do have an advantage. Maybe I can improvise some kind of self-teaching arrangement and while they're catching up I'll be learning more, gaining more experience, until I'm past the level of skill they usually expect of graduates. It's lucky, really, that I'm in the last year of school. Someone might look at this as more years of my life being wasted on something that will never happen now, but it could still happen, and it'll be easier for the senior students, if I just don't let up for a second.

The "captain" of the *Wild Oats* calls an extra mock ship meeting. I report with great alacrity. I don't have study plans drawn up for the rest of the day and I don't know how the situation with the cancelled classes will affect things like when our assignments are due. Anything to do, even sit in the mock ship and be somebody's shoulder to cry on, will be better than nothing. What if this is the closest I ever get? I can't waste a second.

I wind up in a sobbing cuddle-pile of the students who, on happier days, play the roles of biostorage manager, backup astrogation officer, chief archaeologist and interim mess hall chef, and night shift medic. They're warm. They're miserable, and it makes them feel better to be half draped on top of me or to have my ear pillowed on their shoulder. It makes me feel better too. It's the purest form of basic animal satisfaction for the kind of thing we are. This is what humans do when we're alive. I'm surrounded by heartbeats and

breathing and occasional hiccupy crying noises. Maybe I'm crying a little too.

Mom talks sometimes about her trip to this planet. She wound up in a complicated polyamorous affair with the captain, the geologist, and the air recycling maintainer. To hear her tell it they spent the entire trip having exciting new configurations of orgies amongst themselves and with everyone else who'd hold still for it. You bring all the media on record with you, of course, but nobody who works hard enough to get a berth on a ship is the sort to spend years catching up on their passion for Earth poetry or listening to ancient rock operas. They're like me. They study, they have thirty percent of a hobby to keep the lights on in their brains, and they like to be moving around - and on a ship you don't have a whole track, just treadmills. So they -

Oh, who am I kidding. They just want to be touching other people. Exercise or whatever is just an excuse.

The crew of the *Wild Oats* disperses without an official dismissal, after a couple of hours. I almost wait for the captain but then I see he's fallen asleep on one of the electrical techs. I look for my fuckbuddy but I can't find him. Maybe he dropped out. There's never been a better time. People are going to be cutting and running, going and giving their brothers and sisters hugs before that becomes impossible forever.

I go back to my dorm and start looking for job postings in the farming sector.

I am not the first person to have this idea. A listing for a granary supervisor disappears before my eyes to be replaced with a message stating that due to an overwhelming volume they will not accept new applications on the expectation that a suitable candidate exists among those they have under consideration already.

I look for my fuckbuddy again. This time somebody points me in the right direction and I get pulled into the orgy his friends have thrown together. Just what the doctor ordered.

I stagger out an hour or two later and grab dinner and have a brilliant idea: I write my mother. There might be a little more slack in the system without the shipyard, and it's not aimed at anything important anymore, but it can't all vanish overnight, can it? I ask her if she needs any help around the house with my little sibs. I can cook. I got A's in all my child development classes.

She replies that my next-younger sister already had that idea. Says that some of her best friends are retired on the dole and it's not that bad. Asks if I like dogs.

I don't answer her. I go looking for Flora. Flora's grabbed a stray child from the child development daycare and is squeezing him while he sleeps on her shoulder. I whisper. "What are you gonna do?"

"Dunno," she whispers back. "Maybe there'll be a grace period."

"There's never been one before."

"But with the shipyard shutting down. There might be."

I don't want a grace period. Or, no, I want one with a fierce avarice that kind of scares me, but it's not - it's not being useful, it's not being the kind of person I was always supposed to be. I wanted to be a colonist. I was supposed to be, I was meant to be, I was good enough. If I failed at that I wanted at least some kind of place in the world. Farmers feed people. That's something.

"I hate the very thought of video games," I say brokenly.

"My uncle says that's a mean thing to call it," she says.

"If it's about to happen to me I think I can call it whatever I want."

"I'm scared too," murmurs Flora.

I can't take that. I could take conflict and competition. I could take indifference. I can't stand the empathy, the remark you'd get from a fellow-traveler - an inapt term, we aren't going to be traveling anywhere.

Flora pulls her sleeve over her hand and wipes the tears off my cheeks. She pulls me into a hug, her and the sleeping toddler who'll never get to go to space and me.

I wind up staying out late, even though there's nothing I really want to be awake for. I stagger into bed in the wee hours of the night, the shades overhead unfurled and keeping the sun off to protect our delicate circadian rhythms. I wake up in a sweat, five minutes to go till my first class, about to be late. It doesn't matter. It's cancelled today too.

I look out the window. The campus is emptier. People are scattering to their families or their friends. I could go home. I don't really want to. This has been my home. I was ready to switch homes, but - to a ship, once I got a placement. Maybe a new dorm if I wound up in a support role.

There's no way I'm going to C5-110K. Mom doesn't need me back. There aren't any job applications left. I can't even throw myself into schoolwork because they keep cancelling things. Which makes sense, really, if there's nothing to prepare us for, no reason to sift through all the colony's offspring for the best of the best.

What are we going to do? What else do people do, besides try to stay alive, try to run faster than everybody else to save the world? That's all I know how to do. If I decided to turn my Welding As Art project into some bigger fancier worthless sculpture what would be the point?

How do you hold still to save the world?

I flick through the news. There's a lot of op-eds and one physicist confirming that the math on the portal behavior looks sound and it could be that there are possibly very few uses of the portals left before we have to fix them or die. That's our connection to the rest of humanity, not just the way we were going about filling the galaxy. I guess most people feel more strongly about connecting to the rest of humanity than I do. I'm sure they'll be fine without me. They don't need me to send them a card once a year listing my accomplishments. Especially not now that my accomplishments are negligible. But somebody decided we were going to use the portals for messages, as few as possible ("possible"), and not for colonies. If the answer we need isn't reachable from the planets we have, the planets people are already heading to without being possible to recall.

I look away. I get up and walk out of my room and wander, aimlessly, in the air the Precursors made that we can breathe. What if we hadn't been able to breathe their air? Maybe we'd have done it all from space stations. Or gone harder on genetic engineering. It's sidereal night, so it's a bit nippy, but the artificial lights proclaim it day for humans. Maybe we'd have re-engineered all their air, if it had been the wrong kind, and all the animals I'd ever get my hands on would be preserved specimens to dissect for clues to what the characters in their signage means.

I wind up in the building where I take history classes. The professors who have office hours now are lounging in screens on the walls, like portraits, each in their own alcove so people can step in and talk to them without bothering the others or getting in everybody's way. The history teacher calls to me from his niche.

"Hello," I say, automatic.

"You look pretty wrung out," he says.

"No kidding." I pause, chewing my lip. "- what's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"Retiring."

"I do still have a job," he points out. "No, I know what you mean - in my day we just called it 'transferring' - and of course you've experienced it many times. Just... not this you."

"Yeah." I look at my fingernails. I run the pad of my thumb over my pinky nail. In simulations, there's a lot of stuff to track. Humans saccade our eyes a lot. We're sensitive to nanometer-scale textures. Clumsiness in rendering the air can send us into panic cascades about not having enough of the right stuff to breathe. Trying to run people without bodies at all was a disaster. There are all kinds of tricks you can pull to make it economical to simulate a person, of course. More economical than feeding them. There's places you can hide your shortcuts and rugs under which to sweep all your cut corners. Simulations feel high fidelity to the simulated. You can make everything *seem* to happen at the right place and the right time in the right way.

As long as there's only one human in the sim.

"Don't you get lonely?" I ask.

He knows what I mean. Of course he's not *isolated*, we're having a conversation right now. He talks to people all the time. By most metrics his life is lovely. His house is probably thirty times nicer than Mom's and he eats better than I do for all that his food is digital.

But if I have to retire, I'll never touch another human being again.

(It's twenty or thirty years off. Two if you're an optimist. But it always is.)

"I have some dogs," he says. "You're a wildlife major, yes? You'll like dogs. They're the perfect animal. They love running around, and

being petted, and you can train them to do all kinds of things."

There are some dogs in the gene bank but it's never been a priority to make any, at least on this planet. I hear on some planets they've managed to make them useful pulling sleds or herding some of the more flock-inclined Precursor animals. Not here.

"Dogs sound nice," I say.

"Everything else - you get used to it."

"Can I see your dogs?" I ask him.

He shows me the dogs. They don't look like I expect - there are a lot of kinds and they look as wildly different as branches of the same Precursor species adapted to different planets do. But he's right, they sort of are the perfect animal. Interesting without being alien. An easy animal, but not a trivial plush toy. He gave all of his silly names.

I think I'd like to have a dog. The dog wouldn't know my life was pointless. The dog wouldn't know that all its sensory experiences were stripped down to make everything easier to render. It'd lick my face just the same.

The conversation ends, eventually, gracelessly, and I wander back out of the classroom building into the brightly lit night.

I have another alert.

They're building a bigger ship. A more-generations ship. We're going to the Triangulum Galaxy.

I field-process an asteroid with janky equipment I have to manually reset thirty times, in a spacesuit with failing temperature control. I have sweat in my eyes, and my HUD warning me that I've sprung a

liquid re-circulation leak even though I've already gone through my whole patch kit trying to stop it, and a cramp in my right foot. I gather up all the ore we need and haul it, load by load, all the way back to the shuttlecraft, and take it back to the mothership, where the machine shop will render it into spare parts. With a grin on my face threatening to split my cheeks, I die.

Everybody's changing their major. It's going to be a big ship - a fleet of them, actually, for redundancy. It's got room for everybody who wants to go. The Generation folks have a bit of a head start, since we're not going through any portals on our way out and it's going to be for the long haul. I'm not going to be within striking distance of the captancy. But I never even wanted that. I just wanted to be part of the process that gets us where we're going. My great great great great great great great great completely unrelated heirs will be in intergalactic space, out of the path of the gates' explosion. Even if there's nothing we can learn from the Precursors that will save the Milky Way, we don't have to go with it. We can do this. It's never been done - there's never been a generation ship this long - but we're going to pull it off. I'm going to put everything into it.

Everything that isn't putting my hands and my muscles to work can wait. I'm a colonist. I can have a dog when I die.

We're Gonna Sing It Again

i. don't ask where and don't ask when

Hermes is a messenger. He can go where others can't, travel freely between realms that others find impassable.

ii. it's a tragedy

Once he sneaks in to look at the Fates' weaving and sees a peculiar tangle in their loom, just a glimpse before they chase him out. An ugly loop. They'd have trimmed that away if they could, snuffed out whatever mortal did whatever it was that caused such a snarl.

So it must be that they can't cut it.

Hermes thinks about that a lot, about that tangle looping huge and ungainly from the future of the tapestry to the past, and one day he tries it.

iii. his mama was a friend of mine

Calliope is not a particularly good mother. The Thracian fellow doesn't seem any great shakes at parenting either. Hermes isn't sure who *raised* the lad the first time around. This time it was him. Maybe there is a way to thread the needle. Maybe if Orpheus grew up more trusting, more secure, he'd believe Hermes, when he said it was a test, not a trap.

iv. always singing in the back of your mind

He should have known it wouldn't be that simple. There wasn't just one loop, in the tapestry. How many threads before he succeeds? Or

before he gives up? Fifty? A hundred, two hundred?

A thousand?

The Fates glare at him whenever they're in the same room, now. They know it's his doing. He just doesn't care that much about their handiwork or about their glares.

v. who are you

The Fates are sabotaging him, he thinks.

It's getting harder every iteration to affect things, make them go differently. He finds himself saying something he said last time or the time before, finds himself absentmindedly retracing his steps. He can still try new things, with effort, but the effort is enough that he's limited to one or two points of divergence each time. At least, the big divergences; he can make little changes in his delivery when he speaks. Tweak his gestures. He pays a lot of attention to exactly how his voice rises and falls, when he tells Orpheus the story of Hades and Persephone. Maybe there's a way to get it across just so.

vi. a hungry young girl

He doesn't know where Eurydice is before the point at which she arrives at the station. She doesn't talk about it, even if he asks her point-blank. Orpheus isn't curious enough to pry, or, if he is, doesn't report back to Hermes about anything she says. This makes it basically impossible, at least on his limited budget of changes he can make to the timeline, to do anything to change *her* upbringing. He's limited almost exclusively to talking to Orpheus. He's less and less convinced that the boy's childhood matters at all. He makes smaller loops, just the few months where Eurydice is in the picture.

vii. it's a love song

The thing is, he *can* avert the tragedy.

He can step outside the station and chase Eurydice away, and she and Orpheus will never meet, never love.

viii. don't forget that times are hard

He can - after a few false starts learning how mortals manage this - help the girl find firewood and food, skipping off to distant jungles where Persephone's visits are of less consequence and back with an armful of bananas and a sling full of logs.

ix. wait for me, I'm coming too

If he's emphatic enough while Orpheus is deep in creative flow, he can interrupt the songwriting to alert the boy to more immediate and physical needs - and then he goes to help her forage, and he and Eurydice die, but together, like old age come a bit early.

There are a dozen ways to interrupt the story before it sets up its miserable fall.

x. it isn't finished

And if Hermes does any of that, Orpheus can't complete the song. He needs to fall in love, he needs to know loss, and only then will the right notes and the right words reach his lips. Without that song no one, not Zeus and not Demeter and not Aphrodite and certainly not *Hermes*, can resolve the tension. The seasons swing more and more wildly.

xi. blazing hot or freezing cold

Sometimes the world ends in fire, as Persephone evades her husband. The world is choked in kudzu and smothered in pollen.

The sun beats down hotter and heavier. Steamy summer storms can't suck enough warmth out of the air. The animals that can live like this at all overpopulate and then die to disease in their billions. Eventually the tinderbox catches, and the survivors are smothered in smoke or roasted alive.

Sometimes it ends in ice, if Hades chains her down and keeps her at his side. Persephone shrivels to a shadow of herself, marinated in wine and so lost from everything that once brought her joy that it's not clear if she could create spring again given the chance. The seas recede and the glaciers advance and every leaf on every tree blows away to crumble to dust, every waiting seed in the earth perishes without a glimpse of the dawn, and the world is buried in snow.

xii. help you to your final destination

The only thing he can't do is let the lovers in the underworld make it all the way back to the station. Too much direct involvement from Hermes during the walk invalidates the conditions of the test. He can't get Hades to have so much as a civil conversation with him, even if he goes back farther than usual and lives out the decades before Orpheus's birth on rails and tries to find an opportune moment; so the original trial is the only one that Hades ever sets.

xiii. is he always like this

Sometimes Orpheus barely makes it out of the underworld. Sometimes he gets all the way to the station, but turns around just a split second too soon. Sometimes he gives up in the middle of the hike *to* Hadestown; a half-Muse can go longer than an ordinary human being without food or warmth, or he'd never get so distracted from such concerns in the first place, but if Hermes mistimes his interruptions, Orpheus'll be running on fumes when he needs his strength to walk, to sing, to endure, to turn around and lead the dead home - and he'll collapse, and Eurydice will watch

from a few meters back, unable to move forward or make her voice heard in his ear.

xiv. let the poet bless this round

Hermes does eventually think of asking Orpheus about it. It's his entire divergence for the loop, forcing his way through a conversation that isn't the same bedtime stories and avuncular advice he's been dispensing on every trip around the timeline, but he tries.

Orpheus is a good boy, and in his own field, he's a god-touched genius. But he's a little simple - simple in a good way, a pure and beautiful way, part of why Eurydice loves him, part of why Hermes can't leave him to his tragic downfall, but... well, it's hard for him to understand the concept. Hard for him to figure out why Hermes can't just warn him (Hermes always warns him), or can't just go ask his uncle Hades to be reasonable, or can't just - and Hermes has tried all of that. Hermes has tried so many things. This time he's trying asking Orpheus and it doesn't help at all.

xv. whether or not it turns out well

How many threads were there? He tries to get another look at the loom, but he's on such thick rails now. He can still tweak exact word choice. Emphasis. It's a *test*, he says. It's *a test*, he tries the next time. It's a test, he repeats, trying for gentle confidence. It doesn't work. Nothing he tries in that vein sticks with Orpheus as long as it has to, long enough to get him all the way to the end of the line, long enough to let Eurydice follow him into the light of the sun.

xvi. the world we dream about and the one we live in now

Hermes tries letting the world end a few more times. Slight variations. Can he steer Persephone to run away, and then be

caught? Does that change anything, if Hades drags her down below while she cries for her mother and begs for her father and pleads under the eyes of all the gods for rescue? The world still ends. The folks up on Olympus must be excited to start over. They must be longing to try doing something with some kind of fire nymph or some kind of ice spirit as the dominant species on the face of the Earth. They just needed an excuse.

xvii. why go against the grain

Hermes, straining against the railroad tracks woven into his life with every breath, attempts letting Orpheus be dragged up by his absentee mother and his disinterested father and whoever else was around. It's so hard, even though this is how it was the first time around. Orpheus isn't Hermes's son. What happens? If he stands in the right places to see the key moments go by, how are they lined up? - but the boy comes by the station one day and Hermes snaps right back into the pattern. Orpheus doesn't notice anything odd about acting so familiar with this god he's never met before. It doesn't wind up making any difference.

xviii. you're early

Gods don't get bored in the same way humans do. But there is something sort of like it, in the weariness Hermes feels at the thought of trying again.

He isn't ready to give up, though.

He winds back. Back and back and back, to the day he was born, the precocity of his youth. He thinks about things that aren't Orpheus, lives on rails that aren't quite so deeply carved into him. No one returns his meaningful looks, even if they're a little too meaningful. Nobody but the Fates. Did the Fates use to have any particular opinion on Hermes, before? Before the tangle? Even they

can't see infinitely ahead. It can't have been woven in already, the first time he did this - can it? But they know now.

xix. way back when

The long running start pushes him into the timeline with a sort of vigor that he didn't think he could still muster. He'll be back on the railroad soon, back on the cable-thick thread that governs his path forward, but it weighs lightly on him now. He lays helpful tidbits for himself, for Orpheus. Hermes smooths the road around the back. Maybe, if Orpheus's feet are that little bit less tired, if he's gotten there that two minutes sooner, maybe he won't look around over his shoulder. Hermes gets books. Maybe, if Orpheus knows just one or two more stories to draw on, he'll have the strength to see the test through to the end. Hermes, escorting souls where they all wind up in the end, makes an effort to smile and provide a kind word. Maybe, if there's an echo of a whisper of softness in the hearts of Eurydice's fellow dead, they'll find some way of their own to help that they can't think up without it.

xx. there ain't a thing that you can do

It doesn't work.

xxi. what's done, what's done, what's done is done

Tighter loops. More heroics to try any variant, any change of wording he can slip through the gaps in the snarl of his own making. Is Orpheus on rails too? Does he feel the hand of fate on his cheek, pushing his face to look behind? Does he feel the weight of destiny in his heart when he tries, all alone, to find trust and certainty? Sometimes it seems that way. Hermes is too familiar by now with the exact twitches of Orpheus's eyes, the studied steadiness of his hands on the lyre, to feel like the boy is acting much more freely than he is.

xxii. are we gonna try again

Of course, Hermes could just stop. He could just let it end where it ends, and carry on from there. Let Orpheus drown in his own misery and failure while spring comes again and the gods have to wait for another excuse to wipe clean the slate and start afresh. Or he could let Orpheus fail earlier, fail to write the song just-so with the experience of love and pain to give it timbre and bittersweetness, and watch it all disintegrate in a whirl of flame, and see what comes next, the way all his relatives seem raring to do.

xxiii. the first shall be first and the last shall be last

How many threads were in that tangle? Does it matter? Is he foredoomed to give up, or prophesied to succeed? Probably if it was either the Fates wouldn't be so cross with him. His would be just another curious ripple in their many-dimensional textile. They'd know where he'd wind up, and he'd get there one way or another. Hermes thinks they must just... not know.

xxiv. between your ears, behind your eyes

This would be heartening, if Hermes thought they might not know because it was truly undetermined if he'd ever get the thread through the ever-shrinking needle's eye. But he doubts it. He thinks it more likely that they knew he would give up, but didn't know when. Didn't know how many times he'd make the loop. Didn't know how much extra golden god-thread they'd have to spin to accommodate him. But he'd give up sooner or later, all the same.

xxv. how long, how long, how long

Not this time, though.

xxvi. everybody looked and everybody saw

He tries asking more people for advice. Persephone, when she drops by. Eurydice, once he works out how he can get her alone - it's easier to wrangle deviations from his pattern, entire conversations' worth, when not all the major players are present at once. Of course no one has any experience with this sort of thing and no one has anything helpful to offer. He does get a new ending when Persephone is so horrified by the story of eternal winter as to skip out on her marriage early, but what follows is hardly better as a place to leave the timeline lie than what he gets in an ordinary loop.

xxvii. whether or not it turns out well

Hermes winds up with half a word of advice pieced together from everyone whose opinion he seeks. Not everything he tries has to be aimed straight at his goal. He could try stranger things, farther afield. Hermes doesn't think it'll help - if it doesn't matter who brings up Orpheus, what matters the price of tea in China? - but it's worth a try.

Tea has never been more expensive. Six governments are toppled ahead of schedule. Zeus has a new favorite nymph and Hera is in an uproar felt the world over. Ships sink. Forests burn. Bananas rot in the queerest places. Will any of this change anything? Will all his casual aimless destruction perturb anything where it matters?

It's storming brutally when the lovers make their trek home. Orpheus has ice in his hair and his clothes are dripping with sleet, when he turns his head again.

xxviii. brother, what do you care?

Hermes takes a loop off.

He goes to visit Selene, on the moon. Resolutely, the whole loop through, he refuses to leave. She hints that he's overstayed his welcome, but there is plenty of moon for him to kick his way across.

xxix. back into tune, back into time

He hasn't been to all the craters yet, when he sees the colors of the Earth above shift into a perfect spring green.

He checks. Orpheus is where he always is. Alone, like he always is.

xxx. ain't no compass, brother, ain't no map

Lachesis confronts him.

It's not an obvious confrontation from the outside. She does it in broad daylight at the station where anyone could see, and it looks like two old friends catching up while her sisters look on, her and Hermes trading gentle barbs about an inside joke - but for her glare.

Hermes suggests she and her sisters could just let him win. She storms off. The rails tighten. He can feel them constricting around his teeth when he has to deviate from the script to acknowledge she was ever there at all.

xxxii. from long ago

Hermes tries going *forward*, after the next time Eurydice is sucked back into the Underworld. Forward far enough that Orpheus is long gone. Far enough that the coastline is changed and the hills are smoother and the trees are all replaced with similar newer trees. Far enough that Hermes can slide through a crowd and see what the return of spring has brought.

xxxiii. it's an old song

There are still humans. That's something. He hadn't been sure.

But it doesn't have anyone who counts Orpheus as their ancestor, has Eurydice's name on their family stele.

He goes back again.

xxxiii. maybe it will turn out this time

He gets closer than he ever has. Orpheus is gritting his teeth, clenching his hands, staring at a wall when he can't bear to keep scrunching his eyes shut, waiting - shaking and sobbing, but *waiting* - for Eurydice to catch up and put her hand on his shoulder.

Hermes, watching from around the corner, sees Atropos's scissor too late. Eurydice, resurrected, crumples to the floor, dead. Orpheus spins and stumbles to collapse over her fallen form and he wails.

The Fates won't let him have it.

Well. He won't let them have it either.

xxxiv. but we sing it anyway

Hermes goes back again.

Diplomats

"Initiating diplomatic genesis. Stand by. *Asootzo miagru noot blarichamicretifar*," the computer said.

Quinn closed zir eyes and waited. It didn't feel like anything yet.

"Diplomatic genesis in progress. *Mipto blarichamicrefaariblek* ." The alien language was a rumbling hum, resolving into syllables only because Quinn's ears insisted.

Zie had a building headache, rainbowing from the base of zir skull forward to zir eyebrows. It hurt, and Quinn flinched from pain - was tired and yearned for sleep - thought baby animals were *cute* , enjoyed food full of *sugar* and *grease* and *salt* . Aimed zirself at accomplishments hunting *status* , and *security* , out of *anxiety* or *boredom* -

"Diplomatic genesis approaching completion. *Plarbofac rblarim blarichamicretfrem* ."

The pressure burst. Quinn was still a human, but less loudly. Zir head felt less overfull but, if anything, hurt worse, hollow and abraded and throbbing. Zie made a burbling noise and dropped zir head into zir hands. "Nf."

Through zir fingers zie could see glimpses of the alien across the room, a pile of green lobes and dark mantle.

On the table between them was a white box.

"Diplomatic genesis complete," said the box. The voice was Quinn's. Quinn's as it sounded from the inside. " *Lokreb blarichamicoolt* ." Probably that was the foreign ambassador's voice. Or it wasn't. What did Quinn know.

"Welcome, diplomat," said the ceiling speaker, " *alproot inawbeca chamic* ; are you able to select a unique name at this time? *Vasprecimaritaliga cheartipren loor mo deprawingitel.* "

There was a quiet, except for Quinn's panting breaths as zie tried to exhale zir headache. "Call me Roon," the box said, at length, " *kleetmorif atra roon* ." The voice was a little less like Quinn's this time, low and blurry. It didn't sound like Quinn trying to put on an emlood accent, though, it was too - authentic? If Roon's voice was different in the emlood language now, Quinn lacked the ear to pick up the difference.

Roon went on, after a moment, "I'll be an 'it' in English, I think."

"Ambassador Quinn," the ceiling speaker said, "thank you. You may now return to your quarters to rest from your ordeal."

Quinn made a vague hand gesture at the corner of the room where zie remembered the camera being. Zie piloted zir chair out the door without trying to listen to the equivalent remark in emlood. Did they give human ambassadors floatchairs if they didn't have them already? Zie had no idea and lacked the energy to ask.

Behind zir, ambassador rictic slumped out of the room too.

Roon, a whole soul made of rent halves, was left in the diplomatic genesis chamber alone.

Quinn woke up feeling like zie'd been through a thresher. Zie'd wanted this. It had been all zir idea. Ambassadors were set for life. It still hurt, though.

It'll grow back , zie thought.

Someone was pounding on the door. The doorbell worked fine, but people tended not to see it. Tharansi architecture was confusing like

that sometimes. Quinn really did not want to deal with visitors.

The pounding ceased and then the visitor found the doorbell. Quinn also really did not want to try to go back to sleep with that racket. Zie groaned airlessly and reached for zir chair.

When zie'd floated all the way to the foyer - or what passed for a foyer, on Tharan - the doorbell had rung four more times. Whoever was there was also continuing to hammer on the door. Somebody wanted to talk to zir real bad.

Quinn's approach caused the door to open, sliding into the aperture in the wall, and the taller of the two women on the front walk (for Tharan values of front walk) stumbled when it wasn't there to slam her fist into again. The short one dropped the hand that had been prodding the doorbell.

"I was asleep," said Quinn.

"I apologize," said the tall one, pushing old-fashioned spectacles up her nose. "Keesha Janvier, Points of Interest. I'd be happy to reschedule for some more convenient time *and I'm sure my colleague would as well* -"

"Oh, no you don't," said the short one. She had blue hair and more gadgets attached to her face and collar and sleeves than Quinn cared to count. "Jeananne Palmeiro, IPNN. My network has an exclusive with the Ambassadorial Associates."

"That doesn't mean I have to talk to you," Quinn pointed out. Zie might have automatically been signed up for the union, or whatever the heck structure they had, but this just diverted a little of zir pay and, apparently, prevented disfavored publications from running stories about zir for the first couple of weeks or something. Zie was definitely not obliged to give interviews.

Neither journalist was deterred by this. "On background, Miss. -" said the tall one, and "But it'll be only a moment of your time, Mr. -" said the short one.

The reporters looked at each other.

"Don't wrack your brains trying to figure out if I've got no tits or just bad posture," said Quinn. "It's 'Ambassador'."

"My apologies, Ambassador," said the tall one.

"Ambassador, can you tell me how you feel about -" began the short one.

"I feel *like I've had half my soul ripped out* . Go away," Quinn snapped, out of patience as abruptly and inevitably as falling off a cliff. "Whatever it is can wait. Or not happen at all! Get off my lawn." It wasn't a lawn, but zie wanted them off it.

Keesha dipped her head politely and turned to go. Her counterpart wasn't so easily deterred. "- about the controversy surrounding -"

"I said get off my lawn! What, do I have to call security?" The roll of soul-pain ebbed, a little, as Quinn realized zie was ravenous.

"Actually, no, I changed my mind. I'll let you in and answer questions while I eat breakfast but only if I get to watch you two glare daggers at each other the whole time, it'll make me feel better."

Keesha Janvier, Points of Interest, perked up and turned around; Jeananne Palmeiro, IPNN, took this as an invitation to shoulder her way past Quinn's chair.

Quinn floated into the kitchen, trailing journalists, and queued up a fake omelette and a cinnamon roll in the warmer. Zie didn't trust zir arms not to tremble with strain if zie tried to pick up a jug of orange juice just at the moment, so zie pointed this out to Jeananne and

made her pour it. Keesha was tall enough to reach the vitamin pills without Quinn needing to increase the chair altitude. Zie didn't need the vitamins, but taking a pill, any pill, might help zir feel better. Ibuprofen or even opiates didn't do a thing for soul pains.

"So, take turns," zie said, once zie'd eaten half the omelette. Did it take calories to grow back a soul? Somehow zie hadn't read an answer to that either which way in all the informational materials they'd given zir. "You first." Zie pointed arbitrarily at Keesha, mostly because Jeananne looked like she'd make a funny face about it. She didn't disappoint.

"Ambassador," said Keesha, "I hate to start with such a stupid question, but what pronouns should I be writing my piece with for you?"

"Zie. Look it up in your style guide," said Quinn. "It's a stupid question - or it would be, but they wanted an agender ambassador for the emlood."

"Oh, and why was that an important consideration?" Keesha asked, leaning forward. "Was that a primary factor in your selection?"

Quinn rubbed one of zir eyes and started picking apart zir cinnamon roll. "Diplomats bridge gaps," zie said, mouth full of dough and icing. "It's easier if the gaps are smaller. Emlood don't have gender - there isn't even a minority among them that do. But a minority of humans *don't* have gender. So, I'm a good match for an emlood in particular that way on top of the usual ambassadorial considerations."

"Which," continued Keesha, "for our readers, are?"

"You can't look it up?"

"I'd much rather have a quote from you."

Quinn sighed. "Unattached people. People who don't care too much about having bodies. My diplomat's got most of my memories, and we don't want it missing a spouse or cranky about not getting to go skiing."

"Hence the chair?" asked Keesha.

"What do you mean, hence, it's not as though the Terran Commission took a sledgehammer to my spine to prep me for the job. I just happen for that among other reasons not to have a skiing hobby."

"You said 'it'?" said Jeananne.

"My diplomat named itself Roon and said it's an it, yeah. I didn't go in with something picked out but it's not surprising, since, emlood, gender, they don't mix."

"So," said Jeananne, "you didn't list interpersonal skills as a quality they look for."

"They don't. It'd be pointless. We're different species," said Quinn. "Unrelated evolutionary history. Human charisma, human social skills, all that nonsense, wouldn't translate. That's what the diplomat's for, so they pick ambassadors aimed at making a coherent diplomat over anything else. Except if I were a psychopath they wouldn't have considered me a good example of a human if they could possibly avoid it. I do think they wound up needing to go with one of those for some species that really can't merge with human empathy but it's not a first line and my diplomat cohered fine so apparently emlood aren't all that sociopathic. Victory for the advance of xenology. Yaaaay." Zie flopped back in zir chair.

"Is that all an ambassador needs?" asked Jeananne.

"I have to hold down the, you know, actual ambassadorial job. Relaying stuff to and from Roon, translating what it says for human

ears. So they want people who'll get along with themselves, like having an officey job with support staff. I don't have a support staff yet. For some reason, they decided to give me some recuperation time after having my soul torn in half. Just to be nice, I guess. Can't imagine why. But I don't have to sound good on broadcast. Or talk to you."

"So you're going to live here on Tharan Prime for the rest of your life?" said Keesha.

"Sure. Ambassadorial capital of the galaxy. Also, in theory, this swanky house is in a gated community. I guess the gates are busted today because here you are. I don't need a mask for the atmosphere, the Tharansi don't have a love affair with staircases, decent shipping lane to everywhere I might want to import stuff from."

"You mentioned a staff. What will they do? Will they be all your colleagues?" asked Jeananne.

"I'll train people to talk to Roon so I can retire someday or have the glorious freedom to be struck by lightning at any time without costing billions in lost value. And they'll make more diplomats. They do for nearly every species pair. Cultural variety and sheer workload. I know there's only one with the Vree, but, well, they're the Vree. But I don't know how soon they'll do it, because it depends how we get along with the emlood talking to them directly instead of through the Tharansi."

"Do you know much about the emlood?" asked Keesha.

"Nah. I know a few words of the language my counterpart speaks. To understand, mind, not to speak recognizably. I can count to twelve and tell the difference in pitch between past and future tense. They didn't give me homework, this was out of curiosity - Roon wasn't supposed to start with preconceptions when none of the sources I could've looked into would be as good as Roon itself is at

translating emlood concepts into human ones. Besides, for a long while it wasn't obvious my diplomat would be an emlood diplomat. They could have assigned me to the Green Fuzzies or the Mmiikan, I'm about as good a match for those."

"They did make a new Green Fuzzy/human diplomat, though, recently?" said Keesha.

"Sure. I've never met the ambassador, though, and I've probably heard the same three sentences about her that you have. Very enthusiastic Green Fuzzy otherkin, so she definitely couldn't have been in my shoes even if I could've had hers." Quinn finished zir breakfast. "If you two want to keep asking me questions you will do my dishes for me."

The reporters looked at each other, and by some silent process assigned Jeananne to washing and Keesha to drying and putting away. Quinn intended to buy an automaid with zir shiny new salary. Zie would have had a normal dishwasher, but some feature of dishwashers was apparently illegal on Tharansi planets for some Tharansi reason and the market hadn't yet come up with anything suitable to export there instead short of an entire robot.

"So, Ambassador," said Jeananne, dipping close to Quinn's head as she went by with the silverware, "what *is* your opinion on the recent controversy around contact with the emlood?"

"Oh, uh, you know, these things always calm down sooner or later," said Quinn, scratching a phantom itch somewhere north of zir armpit. Why did missing half your soul have to suck so much, zie wondered. "I'm supposed to get my inputs from Roon and staff and so on, I don't really read the news." It was abstractly kind of embarrassing to be the only human ambassador to the emlood and not know what the heck she was asking about. It *sounded* like an ambassadorial sort of thing, keeping up with current events about zir

counterpart species, and if it had been, it would have been an ambassadorial thing Quinn was failing at.

"According to experts and all the serious official sources," Keesha said, "there's no controversy anyway, but I too would really like your take on it - should I explain -"

"No, because you're the news, and I don't read you," said Quinn. "When the Premier sends me a brief on whatever this is, I'll read that. If Roon and I started following different blogs or took up listening to competing podcasts or something we would promptly both be lousy at our jobs, we'd get distracted having stupid political arguments and probably dragging rictic into it too if that's a thing emlood do, instead of figuring out common ground."

"Rictic is your emlood counterpart?" asked Keesha.

"Don't pronounce it with a capital letter, they hate that. But yeah."

"I... don't know how to pronounce things with or without capital letters, but I'll take that under advisement," said Keesha. "Well, to circle back to the human interest angle, I remember hearing that many ambassadors are - by analogy to not having a skiing hobby or a spouse - also asexual, does that describe you?"

What an idiotic question. Quinn wanted to go back to bed for the next fourteen hours. "Nope," she said, "and unless you're planning to invite me to prove it, the both of you can clear out now, go, scoot."

"We did your dishes!" said Jeananne indignantly.

"Come back when instead of my dishes you did some kind of enforceable contract, oh wait, you can't, I don't have to talk to you, get out of my house."

They shuffled out the door, grumbling to themselves and glaring at each other as though each thought her colleague responsible for the

breakdown of the interview, but really Quinn was just exhausted. Zie hadn't meant to be up so early. Had now gotten some calories into zir and had nothing else keeping zir up. Felt like zie was slowly and gently dying of soul-strain.

It'll grow back, zie thought, as zie floated back to the bedroom and shoved zirself out of the chair and onto the mattress.

"Have you experienced any side effects?"

Quinn rubbed zir eyes. "What I was led to expect. Pain, irritability, tiredness."

"And you still don't want a care worker in-home?"

"Doc, if I had a *cat*, I'd make Commissioner Zalas take it rather than be pained and irritable and tired at it. Don't send me a *person*. I bought an automaid yesterday, I'm eating, I'll be fine. How's Roon?"

"Roon's adjusting at a normal rate, meeting other diplomats and slowly picking up some work tasks. It's settled an academic argument about distinguishing emlood poetry and music."

"Yeah?"

"I'm sure Roon can tell you all about it. Unless you're not up to seeing it this afternoon?"

"No, no, I want to talk to it, hopefully it'll, you know, understand."

"The discomfort should lift in the next several days, and we expect it to be unnoticeable by the one-month mark."

"That would be very helpful of you to say if I'd *unexpectedly* had my soul ripped in half."

"- whereupon," the doctor continued, "you can step down your appointments with me to once weekly, if you prefer, though you can continue to come in more often if this would be helpful to you in any way. I gather you don't want to start interviewing support staff immediately."

"Hell, no."

"All right. But you do want to speak to Roon?"

"It must know what I'm like when I'm sick." This was admittedly more painful than the Venusian flu but it wasn't different in kind.

"Episodic memory transfers with the least fidelity, but it should have an idea, yes."

"If I piss it off I'll go home."

"All right. I'm scheduling your interviews with Commission-vetted support staff for three days from now. You have complete veto power, but if you *can* select a full complement from the initial round, it'd be substantially more convenient. Roon recommended adding a second fact-checker to your roster, you'd have to ask it why, on top of the clerical staff and personal assistant and media handler and linguist and Commission attaché."

"Could've used media handling yesterday."

"You were bothered? At home?"

"I saw their badges, they were genuine reporters. Probably someone let them in."

"Well, probably you should talk to the neighborhood gatekeeper about that, or delegate to your PA once you have one."

"Eh. They left when I shoed them. But if you see something in the news that has more about me than my Commission fact sheet that's going to be why."

"Understood. Anything else for today?"

"No. Let me talk to Roon."

"Hello, Quinn."

Its voice had shifted again, darker and more musical. Like some bluesy contrabass trying to sing without opening his mouth too much. Its mouth. Roon didn't have a mouth. Quinn discarded the analogy in frustration. It sounded like a human who'd also incidentally been listening to emlood number chants all day.

"Hi, Roon. How's being a diplomat?"

"Busy. Bodiless. I'm perpetually conscious of my power supply."

Roon was a bulletproof white box housing a civilization's triumph of electronics: a soul receptacle of Tharansi manufacture. It drew electricity wirelessly from half a dozen access points in its room. If anyone tried to touch it they'd get enough of the voltage into themselves in the process that they'd never carry it away from the grid. Even Quinn had to give a retina scan and a voice print and let the security goons check zir and zir chair for possible tampering before zie could enter the building, let alone the chamber. Roon was paired to plenty of peripherals so as to be able to see, hear, speak, probably do some emlood things too that there were emlood technologies for, but if something did manage to happen to its power supply despite all the security its battery wouldn't last too long.

"Wouldn't have expected you to worry about that," said Quinn.

"It isn't that I'm worried."

"Huh." What was it, then - no, Quinn didn't want to ask about that, not when zie was just getting to know this half-of-zirself. They could dig into the details of what kinds of exotic hybrid emotions Roon was equipped with later. "What have you been up to?"

"I spoke to one of the human/Tharansi diplomats. Lin," said Roon.

"I heard from the shrink that you talked to a Tharansi/emlood too."

"Yes, but kueci was less interesting." Was it really? Why would that be? Or maybe it was less *interesting* but more some other trait that emlood valued - no, again, Quinn shoved that aside. Roon was half-human and knew how to talk to humans, and more than that, was half Quinn in particular. If it said something zie shouldn't second-guess it. "Lin is the oldest coherent human/Tharansi diplomat."

"Is - she? I thought it was, I forget, starts with an M."

"She, yes. You may be thinking of Neem, who is the oldest conventionally created half-human diplomat. *Lin* was the first success of the abductions."

Quinn squinted, though there was no body language from the white box to scrutinize. "The what now."

"I think all the ambassadors must know. They wouldn't have put me in touch with Lin if I weren't supposed to find out, and no one asked me to keep it from you either. Probably the Commissioners - at least the ones I remember you talking to - would know."

"Know about... abductions."

"You - may or may not already know, I find I can't recall - that the Tharansi invented diplomats to bridge gulfs within their own genus. The spotted ones with the brown ones, the mountain ones with the swimming ones, and so on. If they ever learned to do diplomacy without it they forgot how long before they got into space. So when

they started finding aliens they didn't know how to get very far with machine translation and guesswork, or at least it seemed - more complicated than they preferred. It's simple, by comparison, to kidnap a few dozen aliens, collect some Tharansi volunteers who have a few signs of possible sympathy to the species such as liking the way they look or finding their architecture less counterintuitive, and start making diplomats until one sticks and can help you talk to the aliens."

"I guess that's exactly the sort of thing that would be swept under a rug, wow. Probably no one even died, unless you count the diplomats that never cohered, but what a thing to do - but landing and saying 'we come in peace' would have a substantial downside risk -" Quinn said, muttering mostly to zirsself, though zie presumed Roon could hear.

"Exactly."

"Is this what they *always* do?"

"Almost. The Green Fuzzies and the 'splal were from the same system, and already on good terms with one another when the Tharansi arrived. They kidnapped some 'splal but were able to source Green Fuzzy volunteers for making diplomats through them. And the Mmiikan, who were technologically advanced and also engaged in civil war to the point of being rather difficult to approach and kidnap. The 'splal were able to help via conventional diplomatic approaches when the Tharansi asked them. In every other case the Tharansi began with abductions."

"What... happens, to the abductees?"

"It varies. They were not much worse off than you. Most were put back where they came from. Lin's human ambassador chose not to go home and stayed to do ambassadorial work for six years before succumbing to cancer," said Roon.

"Wow. I would probably have more complicated opinions on that if I didn't ache so bad. - does it hurt for you too?"

"No. I'm uncomfortable but mostly in a more... philosophical way. Trying to figure out who and what I am and how to reconcile myself. I have the correct amount of soul, even if it's not all from the same source."

Quinn nodded. "- I'm glad you cohered. They say that the ones that don't never wake up, but - I'm glad you're not dead, I guess, even if you wouldn't have ever been alive if you were going to be dead - ignore me, I'm not making sense."

"No, I understand," said Roon. "Of course I understand."

And that was the point, after all, wasn't it.

Quinn went in to see Roon again a couple of days later, when the pain had faded to a throbbing ache, and rest seemed less indicated than distraction. The conversations were recorded. Always, unless one of them asked for privacy, they were going to be transcribed, compared, analyzed: here is Quinn. Here is Quinn plus x. Solve for x.

Roon described emlood neuroses and subcultures and aesthetics, or the closest things they had to those. Quinn could understand them only in fragments, because Roon sketched out all the information in terms individual to Quinn. *Your crush on Kendall in third grade*, it would say, *only without anyone thinking it was cute, without anyone noticing at all, and your crush isn't on third grade Kendall, it's on who you expect her to be when she's seventy. But even if you later decided she wasn't going to turn out that way you'd still have the crush on imaginary future Kendall. Specifically Kendall and not Everly, they were different - focus on the way they were different.* And Quinn would have to grope through this tangle of hypotheticals to come out on the other side with some scrap of recognition about emlood family dynamics.

Or: the way you feel when you've got the painkiller almost to your lips. Not after, once you've put it in your mouth, not before, when you've decided to get one, but: when your headache has not even started to be relieved, but you are almost but not quite irreversibly on the way to fix it. Only in this case it isn't a pill, it's a blob of orange goo you can sit on, and you're solving being bored, not having a headache.

Or: the fourth movement of that symphony. I've forgotten the title. I think you have too. But you know which one I mean, don't you? That one. The really good part.

Or: it's like being too hot - not like being too cold, only too hot - but just not quite hot enough to fiddle with the climate control yet, but you know that you could. Except that for an emlood the problem is that they are too cold -

Or: The exact, exact sort of fun it is to stick a balloon to your hair with static electricity. There's nothing else even slightly right. The balloon comparison isn't right either but it's as close as I can get.

Or: I don't know if you're right about what it feels like for snakes to shed their skin. But the way you imagine it, that's what it's really like, for them -

Quinn found it *fascinating*, even though it was a lot like trying to interpret the stage directions for zir recurring dreams about having been accidentally enrolled in a dental school that didn't have any bathrooms and was by taught by well-meaning fairies that thought they were zir grandparents. Quinn listened. Took notes. Asked questions, where zie thought the missing piece might be something Roon couldn't remember instead of something that was impossible to explain.

Roon wanted Quinn to learn more emlood vocabulary, too, at least in the language rictic and therefore Roon spoke. Zie'd never be able to pronounce anything intelligibly, of course, but there were computer

tools for that; zie just had to use emlood text-to-speech. If there was ever a reason for zir to talk to an emlood somewhere other than Roon's room. But Quinn would work on that later. There was this diplomat zie was dying to get to know.

Roon didn't have to sleep, and Quinn didn't want to.

Quinn's bedtime was apparently informing Roon's schedule, though. At about the time when a responsible version of Quinn would have called it quits and gone home for more sleep, rictic showed up, through the opposite door that airlocked into the emlood atmosphere.

"Oh," said Quinn. "I'll get out of your way."

Quinn was Roon and rictic was Roon - and Quinn and rictic were strangers.

"Oh," said Roon, echoing. "I'll pretend you said something friendly modulo emlood, shall I. And I'll see you later."

"Of course." Quinn floated zir chair backwards, keeping half an eye on the pile of green flesh and the plastic mask apparatus keeping it alive. Zie felt a queer twinge through what zie imagined might be the empty space half zir soul had once been, when rictic's voice rumbled through the room. Roon rumbled back. They'd have the same automatic rapport as Roon had with Quinn, zie supposed. Or, not the same; some alien sort of emotional intimacy taking up the same space. If Quinn asked Roon zie'd be told to compare it with something silly, like zir relationship with zir stepsister except for never having met her before and first encountering her by sitting beside her in a wooden roller coaster and really liking her hat. Something like that.

The rumbling went on. Quinn reached the door and let zirsself out.

During zir downtime Quinn studied emlood writing. The emlood had independently invented writing more times than humans had, but unlike on Earth, a single writing system had come to dominate all the languages in circulation even though - like most species - there were thousands of mutually unintelligible ones to cover. This was not, evidently, because it was simple and easy to learn. Maybe the inventors of this system had conquered all the other emlood at some point.

It was an alphabet, more or less, but the way it was written was mind-bendingly spatial: chunks of inscription were written in shapes, not rows, and flocks of smaller characters swooped between those shapes, past and sometimes overlapping others. Quinn had tried to learn hangul once. Zie couldn't remember anything about it but knew it had taken less than three hours to compose zir first grammatical sentence.

The software for writing the language was buggy, predictably for a program developed by and for a handful of overexcited linguists trying to take direction from yet a third species. Roon was days old; the software had been around for a few months, composed in sprints at the instruction of emlood/Tharansi diplomats talking to human/Tharansi ones talking to the programmers. The banner next to the logo encouraged Quinn to submit bug reports. The documentation said that version 0.6 would include the ability to animate the characters, which modern emlood electronics did. They'd used static writing when they had to, of course - no planet had rocks and pigments lying around on the ground that would jump in the relevant patterns of their own accord - but as soon as there were screens and e-ink and holograms the emlood had jumped on that with great eagerness and apparently the ability to read still characters was on the decline. So Quinn was learning *obsolete* alien literacy skills.

Zie sent in bug reports about once every ten minutes, wished it was realistic to learn on paper, and memorized the first twenty characters

by brute force. Zie took a nap, and ate lunch, and re-memorized the fifteen characters zie'd forgotten. And then it was time for yet another meeting with the doctor, because Quinn's psychological stability was now a linchpin of interplanetary negotiations and would continue to be for a while.

"I've read the transcripts of your meetings with Roon," said the doctor.

"Figures," said Quinn. Zie wasn't really irritable anymore so much as listless. Zie would be going through all the phases of healing and regenerating from catastrophic soul injury and apparently this was one of them.

"Does that bother you?"

Quinn shrugged. "I'm aware they record."

"You can ask them not to. I've never gotten a transcript that my patient or diplomat had asked to have unrecorded, or a portion they wanted to redact."

"I'm not worried about that, it's just - weird that -"

"That your conversations are so interesting all of a sudden?" suggested the doctor.

"Yeah. They don't feel like public interest conversations while I'm having them. Does Roon get a shrink too?" zie wondered suddenly.

"If it wants one. But there aren't any experts on Roon's psychology - not besides you and rictic. And each of you only has half the picture."

Quinn woke up the next morning to a notification that zie wasn't to leave the gated neighborhood. Some kind of kerfluffle about the

news media. Commissioner Zalas had written, *It's not your fault. We'll get you in touch with Roon when it's necessary to do so.* Which of course immediately made Quinn think that probably something was zir fault and that it must be a serious problem. What *was* it?

Okay. Quinn had internet access without leaving the house. It had to be something about zirsself, or Roon, or emlood, so those were the terms to search.

Ah. There it was. *New Human/Emlood Diplomat Generated* . How had - which one was it - Jeananne's editor let that slip? Quinn didn't understand it zirsself but zie knew better than to put "emlood" in capital letters, wouldn't even start a sentence with it in case some outdated software insisted when zie wasn't looking, and zie'd *warned* those reporters. Now the emlood government was demanding the editor and Jeananne Palmeiro delivered to them, which was really unlikely to end in apology gift baskets and handshakes.

The article wasn't fresh, but presumably news filtered to the emlood only gradually and through intermediaries and they'd taken a while to be aware that someone had published an article with a capital letter in their species' name. Who'd told them, Quinn wondered - zie wanted to ask Roon if it'd been its doing, but what would zie do if the answer was "yes"? Roon hadn't met the reporters, that had happened after the genesis, zie might have considered the lives of a couple strangers unimportant compared to the emlood sense of honor. Or whatever it was. The sensation of tweezing a hair out of the weird mole on zir arm while playing vintage television in the background and reflecting on the sound of the ocean, or something.

But Quinn was quoted in the article, zie could see in the pull quote, so if Roon had read it, it'd known that they weren't strangers to Quinn. That would matter to a human, or at least to Quinn, but would it matter to an emlood? Or rictic?

Quinn was jumping to conclusions. Zie shook off the storm of thoughts and opened the actual article.

Ambassador Quinn looks exhausted, though third parties say that the disheveled ponytail is zir usual way of handling zir long brown hair, and zir pajamas could pass for street clothes on some planets. Wow, Quinn did not like being a public figure. It wasn't even supposed to be part of zir job. Who'd let those people in? Clearly a terrible decision all around.

Zie was not actually supposed to read this. Zie was supposed to get information from the Commission, from Roon.

The emlood, said a later paragraph, were a signatory to the pangalactic Tharansi-proposed treaty forbidding warfare or preparations for warfare with other signatories. The emlood (through Tharansi ambassadorial relays) have maintained that they intend to abide by their obligations, but have not commented on the leak indicating that their ships have been found to be carrying terrain upheaval apparatus and weapons of planetary sterilization. Instead, emlood counter-accused the Mmiikan port authorities in the border sector of violating the more local regulations governing ship inspections. Ambassador Quinn had no comment on the matter. Ambassador Li Zou to the Mmiikan said that it was a clear violation of the preparatory clause even if the emlood are able to somehow prove that they have no plans to deploy the devices against any fellow sapients, and that his diplomat, Kelai, believed that the emlood should be found in violation. Tharansi enforcement has yet to issue any statements, even preliminary ones. The Ambassadorial Commission did not return requests for comment.

It was easily possible that rictic hadn't known anything, that Roon hadn't known anything. There were a thousand ways that reporters could have learned about a public accusation by the Mmiikan. There were probably also a thousand ways that emlood could have learned about the copyediting disaster; just because Quinn didn't yet know

much about how they transmitted information among themselves didn't know they didn't have plenty of ways.

Why hadn't the article least been taken down?

There were other articles. Quinn opened one about the tussle over the extradition demand - ah, apparently taking the article down would be tantamount to destroying evidence by putting a fresh layer of wallpaper over it, if you were an emlood - did they ask Roon that, it sounded like a Roonish comparison. There were explainers about the terrain upheaval technology. About the plausible peaceful uses of planetary sterilization weapons (well, comparatively peaceful - you could, if you weren't very ecologically minded, use it to clear out a hostile biome that didn't include any people.)

Quinn looked and looked.

...cautioned that without the ability to communicate directly with the emlood, overinterpreting the discovery prematurely could be provocative, but Ambassador Quinn has not reached out to give...

...Mmiikan diplomats assured their ambassadors that the Mmiikan are likewise staunchly against weakening the protections of the treaty...

...anonymous professor of terraforming engineering has rendered the expert opinion that no species is likely to find terrain upheaval a valuable part of benign interventions intended to make a planet more habitable to them, being as it renders the area ongoingly geologically unstable, and...

...await comment from Ambassador Quinn, once zie is recovered enough from diplomatic genesis to perform zir duties...

This wasn't one of zir duties, zie didn't have to talk to anyone, zie was not a charismatic public relations manipulator, zir job was to talk to Roon.

And Roon hadn't said anything about it.

"I don't want this recorded," Quinn said.

The covers for the cameras didn't shut. Those were Roon's cameras. But they had indicator lights that went from white and on the left to blue and on the right.

"What is it, Quinn?" Roon asked.

"Talk to me, Roon."

"She sells seashells by the seashore." It didn't need to use a mouth to speak; it didn't trip over its nonexistent tongue.

"Roon, am I going to have to be ambassador to a species that throws around weapons of mass destruction?"

Silence. Then, "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I've found the article now."

"Are you sure rictic didn't know?"

"If it did, the memory didn't transfer."

Quinn's ponytail was slipping. Zie pulled out the elastic and refastened it. "I was hoping for a cushy nigh-professorial 'furtherance of understanding' gig," zie said. "Not trying to relay for people who are shooting at each other. Those things aren't very defense-oriented. God, Roon, do they have the concept of not shooting the messenger, am I *safe* if they get pissed off? I had to come here under armed guard with decoy convoys just because they're paranoid about lone actors shooting me to make a statement. I shudder to think what will happen if the emlood as a state entity want me dead."

"The emlood signed the treaty agreeing that diplomats and ambassadors are not targets... but they also signed the warfare preparations one. I can see why this wouldn't reassure you."

"Guesses," prompted Quinn.

"They picked rictic for its human-compatible psychology, not for social connections or strategic knowhow; they didn't know how much leeway they had to screen on other desiderata since I didn't exist to tell them. It's more of an outlier for an emlood than you are for a human. I could ask it to come here, and we could at least figure out if I'm missing anything that it knows."

"- what, right now?" said Quinn, shifting uncomfortably in zir chair.

"Its schedule isn't like yours. I can ask it to come here whenever I like and it will come." A silence. "You don't like it."

"I don't know what to think of it, Roon, it's illegible to me. I know you're half it, but you *act* just kind of like you're - me with the ability to read rictic's mind. Why, does it like *me*?"

"That's sort of complicated."

"Do emlood not like people?"

"- kind of. Not in the same way and not for the same reasons. To the extent the idea translates it has a good opinion of you, mostly for being chosen as its counterpart, partly because it likes me - for emlood values of liking, again - and you come as a package deal with me."

Quinn chewed on that explanation. It had no dreamlike analogies, which was somehow worse. "What about you?" zie asked.

"It depends. I like you in a human way. It has a lot to do with familiarity and identification. For that matter that's mostly also how I

like rictic."

"Wow. - we should have that chunk of conversation over again sometime when we're on record. This time I just want to figure out how to finagle the - terrain upheaval, planetary sterilization, treaty violation - thing."

"I understand. I will ask rictic the next time I speak to it."

"I - no, go ahead. Call it in," sighed Quinn. Zie looked away. This was pointless, Roon had cameras all over the room and didn't have to look at zir from the white box. "How long will it take?"

"It will be here in less than ten minutes." It sounded cheerier, presumably on purpose. It wanted its components to get along. Quinn had not done much thinking in advance about how zie would, if zie'd been the half of zir soul glommed together with an alien in a box, feel about the working relationship of zir ambassadors. Perhaps zie should have so zie could know if this was surprising. Probably it wasn't, probably it was just the desire of a child of divorced parents to see them back together, notwithstanding that rictic and Quinn had no previous acquaintance and certainly hadn't raised Roon from childhood. "I'll translate, even if you've been very diligent about your homework you're never going to be able to hear all the subsonics."

"You sound so human," Quinn remarked softly.

"Oh?"

"You said 'subsonics'. Below the human range of hearing. You can hear them fine. But you're verbally taking for granted that this is a superpower you have, not a human limitation I have. The language is too low, I'm not just tragically deaf."

"I'm speaking English," Roon reasoned.

"Yeah. I just - wonder what I'm missing."

"That's what I'm here for," said Roon.

And then rictic slid through the airlock.

Quinn didn't look directly at it. For one thing, zie wasn't sure whether it was rude or not - both norms could be found in human cultures, let alone alien ones - and for another it probably couldn't track zir gaze. If it cared, it could ask Roon, who'd say something appropriately... diplomatic. Whatever would serve the same social function as politely neglecting to mention that Quinn did not really care for the look of emlood flesh heaped on itself.

They started rumbling. They didn't so much interrupt each other as overlap, like there was no reason to be quiet while another person was speaking. Quinn couldn't distinguish their voices. Zie didn't know if that was a deficiency in zir ability to tell emlood voices apart or if Roon had just adopted this voice without any alterations like the ones it made to Quinn's. It might signify something different in the one case than in the other. Come to think of it, it wasn't even obvious what it signified in Quinn's case...

The rumbling stopped. Quinn's chair, settled on the floor, stopped conveying a low buzz into zir spine. Roon said in plain English, "It didn't know."

"Well - what does it think of it now it knows?" asked Quinn.

"You can't tell anyone."

"- huh?"

"It doesn't have the kind of - status - within emlood society, that it would need, to give a genuine opinion, if someone else might find out. Me and you are different to it, but you cannot tell reporters, Commissioner Zalas, anyone. I also assured it we weren't recording."

"Okay..."

Roon took that for the agreement it was and resumed rumbling. Quinn levitated zir chair; it was slightly less comfortable to have it wobbling on thin air instead of planted on firm ground, when zie wasn't even going anywhere, but the floor conducting the noise was threatening to grind zir bones to powder.

Eventually they fell silent. Quinn looked expectantly at Roon. Wondered crazily if zie could put stickers on it - probably the voltage would prevent it in practice, but would Roon mind -

"It thinks," Roon said, "that there must be a good explanation."

"And how much was lost in translation there?"

"Rather a lot," admitted Roon, "but the gist is right. It doesn't know why they had those weapons, but it doesn't think that the statements that they aren't going to use them to prosecute a war against any signatories are likely mistaken."

" *Mistaken* ," repeated Quinn.

"You might say 'lies' to express the same idea, but it means something closer to 'mistaken', because there would have been too much social pressure and structural incentive involved, in producing those statements, for anyone to lie in the emlood conception. So they'd either be mistaken, or not mistaken, and it expects the latter."

"Do you have to explain this much to it about everything I'm saying?"

"It's less interested. When it comes up, yes, more or less. We haven't been doing this for very long yet, we'll all get used to it. Do you want to ask it anything else?"

"Does it know anything else?"

"It could speculate."

"...Are the emlood hoping to colonize someplace that could use sterilization and upheaval, someplace with just plants and bugs or whatever? The terraforming expert said upheaval wasn't useful for terraforming, but maybe he's full of it."

Roon and rictic spoke, and there came the report: "It doesn't know of any specific colony prospect that might have to do with this business, but they are generally interested in colonizing, and it could imagine finding a mountainous or wetland area inconvenient enough to alter seismically even if it would take considerable time to settle."

"I guess that would be a good explanation, if that were how terrain upheaval worked - I suppose they could have something cutting-edge - but why wouldn't they tell the Mmiikan that was what was up? -"

"The Mmiikan/emlood border is mostly well-defined, but it does have a few places where it remains relevant who has established the most Tharansi-legible claim to a system first," said Roon. "So it's possible they want to settle the place before the Mmiikan know it's desirable. They have similar living condition requirements, if only at some extrema."

"Hunh. Well, I guess that makes it sound somewhat more likely that this'll all blow over without much blowback onto *me* ... is it going to be able to find out anything else?"

"It can try. Are you done for the day, Quinn?"

"- nah, I don't have anything else to do, and maybe if I stall long enough they'll call off the guards and I can float home by myself. We can do understanding-furtherance stuff, take my mind off everything."

"Resuming recording," said Roon. The little indicator lights on the pickups flipped back into their usual place.

And they talked about other things, Quinn and rictic each querying their diplomat in their own ways and getting their own answers.

The emlood didn't like capital letters because they didn't like the implications of a hierarchy as simplistic and unnuanced as "capitalize proper nouns, and extra capitalization for God, but maybe only if you're religious". It wasn't that they preferred to be lower-status, Roon explained, but that the institution of capital letters was so laughable that being offered this status wrapped all the way around to being insulting. They had an enormous vocabulary for smells but no words for colors, though they did distinguish them. Albeit the blue rictic saw was not the blue Quinn saw - Roon's cameras had both modes. The emlood had something very like the common human appreciation of tidy round numbers, except in base eight, and much more openly acknowledged. They were planning to colonize seven new planets for a round octet as soon as they had seven candidates lined up, all in parallel, so as not to spend any awkward period of time as a three-planet species.

Humans liked keeping cats, and riding horses. Humans could cast adults in teenage roles in movies, which would have been implausible for the metamorphically maturing emlood. Humans, to emlood ears, sounded like a certain bug-like family of creatures from their world, with four wings and an annoying yelping vocalization that attracted predators away from its eggs. Humans artificially colored their food. Humans sometimes used titles so sarcastically that their original polite form was all but lost to history. Humans could recover very quickly from even fairly substantial abdominal surgery, but really didn't want to have any if they could avoid it. Humans did not like standing in the rain, even though they evolved in a planet where it rained and often chose to clean themselves via artificial rain.

Quinn wasn't sure if it was more interesting to learn things about the emlood, or to hear things about humans in this defamiliarizing

context, learning what aliens thought was most fascinatingly alien about zir.

According to Roon, rictic had been picked as an ambassadorial candidate because it was missing an entire normal emlood emotion, as strange as a human unable to experience fear. "It's analogous to you not having a gender, in some ways," Roon explained, "but in terms of how it's understood by other emlood and how it's dealt with in its life so far, it's more like it's autistic, it learned all the rules explicitly with wide error margins to be safe." Quinn wound up taking out zir mobile to play Torus Crash during the prolonged subsequent explanation of human gender. Maybe emlood back on their homeworld were waiting with bated breath for this key insight into how humans ticked. They'd have to settle for Quinn's outsider view on it, but that was probably better than nothing.

Humans hedged bets and slacked off and vented to their friends. Meanwhile, emlood recited numbers to themselves and sat on orange blobs (Quinn still did not understand the thing about the orange blobs after Roon had a go at translating it) and stuck rocks in their mantles "sort of like chewing gum, or like trichotillomania?". Humans wrote stories about talking animals. Emlood children invented complicated relationship tangles for their collections of nutshells and ritually destroyed the ones that lost imaginary popularity contests. Humans started with arithmetic in math class, and with the alphabet in literacy. History classes for emlood were taught in a style of falsehood, with a standard transformation you had to apply to any remark about a past event to find out what really happened, and all the expected irreversible casualties when the sorts of things that were told as conventional lies actually occurred.

They both thought Green Fuzzies were cute - humans because they were fuzzy, and emlood because they were green. Green things were just cuter, explained Roon.

They both liked looking at the stars.

Quinn stayed until zie had to go attend to zir human need for dinner and sleep, and left the other two rumbling at each other with a smile on zir face.

Quinn hurt all over when zie woke up, and this was so customary that zie took about three minutes of disconsolate lounging to notice that zie also wasn't in zir house.

Come to think of it, zie also hurt more than zie should. It hadn't been this bad yesterday. Zie didn't think it was one of those healing processes that went two steps forward, one step back.

Zie sat up. Zir chair was nowhere to be seen. The place looked like a human room, if not necessarily in a human building - there were those rounded lower corners and that scallop-textured ceiling, but the furniture, none of which was zir chair, all looked like you'd find it in a hotel. There was even an art print on the wall. A watercolor of a trio of ducklings.

Whoever'd put Quinn here hadn't tied zir up, but zie wasn't going to get far without the chair. It definitely didn't look like a *hospital* - zie hadn't been coshed over the head on the way home and then rescued by nurses who needed remedial mobility-device-related training. Zie had most likely been coshed over the head and then successfully abducted. And not by Tharansi who wanted to make first contact, either.

"Ambassador," said a voice. The door was sliding open - definitely a Tharansi door - that also explained why there weren't any windows -

"Random kidnapper," Quinn replied flatly.

"If it amuses you to call me that." The random kidnapper had a gigantic bushy black beard, and he was, like some kind of movie

villain, wearing a deep hood that covered the rest of his face.

"I'm amused as all get out here. You know what's hilarious? Not having my chair. That's just absolute comedy gold right there."

"Would you have preferred to be handcuffed to the bed?"

"I would have preferred not to be kidnapped. You don't even get a you-tried star for not handcuffing me. I am not going to interview a few hundred past victims and award you Most Improved because you went from hanging folks upside down in a rattish-infested cellar to the business travel edition."

"There's unfortunately too much at stake to have passed up the opportunity," said Hooded Villain, sounding awkward if not chastened.

"Oh, I'm sorry to have maligned your no doubt worthy cause, see, you've caught me with half my soul missing and I'm not at my most charming."

"We're aware of that."

"What do you want?"

"What everyone else wants, of course," said the kidnapper. "We want you to talk to Roon."

Hooded Villain hauled Quinn firefighter-style into the next room. No one had picked Quinn up since zie'd been twelve and zie didn't appreciate the return to form, but zie didn't waste zir effort batting at the kidnapper with zir ineffectual fists. There, the rest of the gang of four was assembled; Hooded Villain's colleagues acquired the mental monikers of Venusian Stereotype, Pink Dyejob, and Chip (who was, at the moment Quinn failed to come up with any better nickname, eating chips).

Once settled in a (completely nonfloating) chair, Quinn was presented with dubious microwave moussaka, with a side of something incongruously fancy made of lentils and squash ribbons and lemon. Zie figured if they'd wanted to poison zir they could have done it while zie was unconscious, and they were all eating from the same serving bowl, and Venusian Stereotype didn't stop zir from swapping forks at the last second... so zie ate it, being as it was hours past the dinnertime zie'd skipped to be kidnapped instead. It was distracting, though, to have to maintain zir position in a chair that didn't have armrests; it was difficult and if zie messed up zie would fall onto the floor. "I want my own chair back, you jerks," zie muttered.

"It's safe," said Venusian Stereotype.

"What, are you going to hold it at gunpoint for my cooperation? What do you even want?"

"I said, we want you to talk to Roon," said Hooded Villain.

"They're not going to put me through to it under these conditions, moron."

"Roon hasn't been operative long enough to be very useful without you. You represent a considerable investment and I think they'll want you back."

"I think they'll express that with the armed forces, not with a line to my diplomat so I can parrot whatever you want me to say."

"You don't know what we have to say yet," said Pink Dyejob.

"I assume you have some kind of demand. Or maybe you just want to insult the emlood in a really culturally literate way. Whatever. It doesn't matter," Quinn said. "They're not going to give you access."

Venusian Stereotype, from the far end of the dinner table, snorted. "You haven't heard what we want you to say," she reiterated.

"That might have something to do with your not having said it yet," said Quinn.

"Did you read Palmeiro's article about you?" Hooded Villain asked. "Even if you were just reading it for vanity and it was the only coverage you saw..."

"You *suck*," Quinn said, pointing a fork at Hooded Villain. "Like, as a person. Deep within your soul."

"Souls are, funnily enough -"

"Don't quit your dayjob, comedian."

"- the thing at issue. What would you think of me if I didn't have one?" finished Hooded Villain.

"If you try to make two diplomats in a row the second one just doesn't work."

"No, no, if I never had one, any fraction of one."

"I admit that it would be hard for me to think less of you than I already do, what with the kidnapping."

"Engage with me here. Suppose -" he began.

" *You kind of kidnapped me on my way home without my chair, asshole.* "

"Oh, for fuck's sake," said Pink Dyejob. "There's aliens without souls and the emlood are going to genocide them and the Tharansi are in on it."

"Take it up with Wildlife Among The Stars or the Conservation Party," snapped Quinn.

"They're not animals," said Chip, softly; it was the first time she'd spoken. "They build cities. They have controlled fire, plumbing, a chemical analogue to writing."

"Fancy space ants," said Quinn derisively. "Hurrah."

"The Tharansi thought they were people, too. They took more than a hundred of them trying to make a first diplomat. Didn't work. They tried over and over, in case it was just bad luck," said Pink Dyejob. "They were so convinced that they had to have souls."

"They thought maybe they were just too different from Tharansi in particular," murmured Chip. "They recruited some people from other species in case one of those was close enough. Quietly, through Lin, who you might not have heard of -"

"The first human/Tharansi diplomat, I know, I know."

Chip inclined her head. "They took me and some other candidates to the planet. More humans, lots of Tharansi, couple of Green Fuzzies, at least one Vree. They showed us around to see if we'd be likely fits, if the place looked - comfortable, aesthetic - to improve their chances. They got us to pick out who to kidnap, who to try pairing with. I thought I was helping, I - so they showed me a bunch of them and I picked one I thought looked friendly. They're not cute exactly, not pretty, but one seemed friendly-looking and that was all we had to go on... And when it didn't work they gave us a lot of hush money, compensation for the soul damage, I..." She choked a little. "I think they gave up then. I think they didn't put them back, I think - I think maybe my opposite number got dumped in a waste chute."

"If the Tharansi don't want to try doing soul-invariant diplomacy," said Hooded Villain, "the 'splal could. The 'splal haven't been told

this species exists. The new planet is right where the emlood want to expand. And they don't have souls, so the Tharansi think it's fine for the emlood to wipe them out."

"So tell the 'splal," said Quinn, grouchily cutting up a stubborn bit of eggplant. "I recommend doing it without kidnapping any of them. My consulting fee will be -"

"Do you know anything about the 'splal?" asked Venusian Stereotype.

"I was never a candidate to be their ambassador, so no, not really!" snapped Quinn. "Next time you want to have me over for dinner you could let me know what my homework is ahead of time, though, that would help!"

"The 'splal care a lot about *procedure* ," said Venusian Stereotype. "It's why they're so good at doing the whole from-prime-numbers-on-up thing compared to everybody else. They make very small, conservative moves. They have all their data analyzed by tons of people to make sure they're pruning out all the chauvinist assumptions. They don't act very differently when they have access to diplomats and preexisting lines of communication. So they're not going to go visit this species without all the boxes checked and the treaties signed. The 'splal will never start a war - because they never do things that are at all like 'show up on a planet the emlood want to sterilize without Tharansi authorization and attempt to talk to *fancy space ants* '."

"Thank you, this has been so educational, now what do you want with *me* ?"

Venusian Stereotype went on, "The Tharansi have made up their minds. They care more about souls than anything else, and they've made pretty sure that the new species doesn't have any, and it's obvious they don't care to consult anyone else before confirming that the emlood can have the place because it's in their general area

and they want it. The emlood - we don't know much about emlood yet. You're the first ambassador to them we've got. One of the first any species has got, Quinn. And that means we, being humans, *don't know* if they can be persuaded."

"Your inconvenience is temporary," said Hooded Villain. "An entire species is on the line. We didn't think an email would arrive, uninspected, and be taken seriously -"

"So you decided to kidnap me."

"The Tharansi kidnapped scores of the new people," said Chip. "I think mine was scared - it was tied up opposite me, when they tried to make a diplomat of us, so it couldn't get away. You don't seem concerned about them."

Quinn glared at her. "Do you always try to open negotiations by telling your prisoner they're selfish for being more concerned about being personally kidnapped than about space ants they've never met?"

"Every time so far," said Hooded Villain. Rather than pick Quinn up again he shoved the chair, ground-bound and wheel-less, back to the hotel room where zie'd woken up. "It seems like you're done eating."

The chair legs scraped against the floor and rattled zir aching bones. "I hate you," zie said.

"I think I'll cope." He dumped Quinn out of the chair into bed and then took the chair with him on the way out of the room. Quinn was left alone.

In the morning, Chip brought zir breakfast. "Hey. How are you?"

"Kidnapped. Missing half my soul. Immobile. Bored."

"Bored enough to listen to me talk about the new species?" she asked.

"Could I possibly stop you?"

"You could put me off till later, I guess."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't want to keep you waiting, please, wax rhapsodic." Quinn stabbed at zir fruit salad with unnecessary force. A grape escaped.

Chip sat down on the edge of the bed, sighing, looking subdued.

"Have you named them, or anything? Save the insert name here?" asked Quinn. "I've been calling *you* Chip, in my head."

"Chip? That's awful. Call me Violet, it's not my real name but at least it's a name. I have something I call them but it's not official and you'll probably laugh at me."

"Fine, space ants it is."

Violet looked away, lips pursed, like she didn't want to make a face while Quinn was looking. "If you say so. They were scared, I think, of the vehicles. They didn't try to attack us, just got out of the way. They don't look like ants. More like... fluffy millipedes. They're not too fast overland but they can go from zero to top speed real quick. Scattered when they noticed us coming on all those feet. They come in shades of brown and grey. They dye themselves, with clay and plants and ashes... The one I picked ran backward, so it could look at us while it got out of our way. It was so funny. It didn't chase us, but we circled back later, and it was the same one, it'd dyed half of its left feet purple... so I picked that one, I said I'd try to make a diplomat with that one, and the Tharansi grabbed it in a net and it didn't make a sound. They don't make sounds. They have sign language and the chemical writing I mentioned. I don't know if they can hear, I don't know why they don't use symbols to write like we

do - I don't know much about them at all. Because the diplomat didn't work. I'm farther along than you at regrowing my soul, probably I'm at sixty percent now, but if I seem a little run down..."

"Tragic," said Quinn flatly.

"Yeah, yeah, we kidnapped you so you don't give a rat's ass. And they tried to get half a soul out of my friendly alien and it didn't work. You couldn't tell for sure, just from the two of us - were we just not a good enough match? Does it not have a soul at all? Does its soul not tear in half the way everyone else's does? But every other species we've met works the same way, and they tried so many times. So the Tharansi decided, that they were just strange animals after all."

"And you want me," said Quinn, "to tell Roon to tell rictic to tell the emlood that there's been a mistake, they can't have the planet after all, they have to tell their 'splal ambassador to tell their 'splal diplomat to tell *their* other ambassador to go talk to space ants."

"Yes."

"And you decided the best way to communicate this -"

"Your mail's being screened."

"I don't want to sift through doorstoppers from every green ink maniac who thinks the emlood are sending them messages via alphabet soup, no shit they're screening my mail!"

"I don't blame you. But you can see why they might not have let us get through to you, especially if Tharansi are participating in the screening. The emlood don't want to be delayed by debating about it. You'd have to ask your diplomat for details but I wouldn't expect any species to have evolved to be indifferent to getting what they want when they want it. The Tharansi are accommodating them and for more on *that* you'd need to talk to a Tharansi diplomat. Which I

encourage you to do. *After* you've talked to Roon about the new species."

"Do you have some plan that involves letting me go do that ever?"

"We aren't mindreaders. If you're a good liar you could probably get us to let you go without intending to do anything to help. Even though it would take two minutes and could prevent a genocide."

"Remarkably strong word, that."

"They have sterilizers and terrain heavers. They're not going to leave any alive."

" *Have* you tried going to some ecology interest group? They'd go for it whether or not the space ants are people. Save the xenomoss. Protect the charismatic megabeasts. A shikken in every zoo."

"That's where we got - well, we're not giving our real names -"

"Hooded Villain, Venusian Stereotype, or Pink Dyejob?"

"...the pink one. She's with an ecology group. They aren't able to talk directly with the emlood. The *only person* who can do that is Roon."

"They'll make more diplomats."

"It's possible none of them will cohere until it's too late. It's possible that even if they do, we won't have any better way to get through to them either."

There was a silence.

Violet said, "Will you talk to Roon?"

"Give me my chair back," said Quinn.

"Will you?"

" *Fine* , damn you all."

"Thank you," said Violet. "Someday - when we know how to talk to them - maybe they'll thank you too."

"Oh yay. Chair."

"All right, all right," she laughed. "We'll have to load you up and drop you off somewhere else, I'll tell -"

"CHAIR," barked Quinn, and Violet got up and scampered.

The Commission didn't let Quinn go straight to Roon after zie popped up, zir chair out of battery and zir mobile having been left behind entirely on the moss by where zie'd been ambushed. They wanted zir to sit a psych evaluation, first - what, did they think zie'd been hypnotized - and tell the human unit of cops who came to zir house everything zie could remember about the place.

They didn't actually seem to want to know why somebody'd chosen to kidnap Quinn and then just let zir go. Zie mentioned, once, "did they send you any demands -" but they hadn't. Said, during the psych eval, "they had some political complaints about the emlood -"

"Whatever they want to complain about, it'll have to go through channels. They're fixing up the security in the residential, I think the cops are actually interrogating the reporters who got in here in case they used the same hole but they're going over everything like ants in a candy shop. Do you want to move to a new house?"

"No," said Quinn. "I just got moved into this one. Did they take me out of my house, I don't recall."

"No, it looks like they had the guards infiltrated. Investigation's still underway and I don't have many details for you. So if you don't want to move it's not a security essential."

"Good. What an enormous waste of time. They didn't let me have my chair, you know."

There. Quinn didn't feel like zie was being cagey about the kidnappers' motives - little though zie wanted to talk about them, it seemed a little early to be fomenting rebellion against zir Commission handlers, especially while zie was still recovering from major anima injury - and spent the entire session instead processing zir mobility issues.

Quinn was pronounced fit to resume zir nominal duty schedule the following day, and if zie sat up half the night mulling over space ants, well, zie didn't feel that this was anybody's business.

Zie brought breakfast into the diplomat chamber the next morning. Roon told zir to take it right back out again, so zie ate in the hallway outside and came back in, cranky but not especially deterred from zir plans. Distracted, though, yes. "Is eating private for emlood?"

"Yes," said Roon.

"...were you going to elaborate on that?"

"I suppose it's my job but I'd like a day or two to collect my thoughts on it before I try to discuss them. Imagine if rictic came in and started peeing on the floor."

"Is it likely to?"

"No, but if it did that'd be about the level of awkwardness. I heard you got kidnapped?"

"I got kidnapped. They took my chair."

"Wow."

"They were like, would you rather be handcuffed."

"And you said, I'd rather not be kidnapped, you assholes?"

"Nearly verbatim. They did eventually let me go."

"I was worried about you."

"Well, you'll have to get by without me one of these days but not this one. I have a question for you, though - uh, let's stop recording -" Zie was trying to sound offhand, so anyone looking at the transcript wouldn't feel like there had to be something really juicy in the redacted section. Maybe they'd think it was about emlood pee.

"Okay," said Roon. It wasn't fooled at all. It knew zir too well.

Quinn waited a heartbeat, another one - they were getting faster -

"Quinn?"

"The kidnappers wanted something."

"What was it? If there was a ransom demand or anything like that I didn't hear -"

"No, they - they said they knew what the emlood were going to do with the weapons. They said -

"- Roon, I have no idea where your sympathies on this really lie. I can't even figure out my own. The Tharansi seem to know what they're doing, they made a decision, and hell, it's not like I'm a huge fan of the folks who kidnapped me that I want to pay loads of attention to what they want out of life, but -"

"It's okay," murmured Roon. "It's just me."

"I barely know you."

"You know me."

Quinn gripped the arm of his chair. "There's a species that looked mighty sapient to the kidnapper I talked to who'd seen them. But they don't have souls. The Tharansi gave up trying to make diplomats. And it's in the emlood sphere of expansion."

There was a silence. Quinn might have been imagining the electronic hum from Roon's box growing louder.

"That's bad," Roon said at length.

"Yeah. That's bad. They wanted me to talk to you to find out if the emlood can be convinced. They didn't specify convinced to what - try another hundred times to make diplomats out of them, try letting the 'splal talk to them the long way, try leaving them alone for a hundred years and seeing if they invent radio. Probably any of those would be better than nothing. But - you're the one who'd know."

Silence. Silence. What must it be like, Quinn wondered, holding such a vague concern as *what to do with soulless aliens* in a diplomat's mind. What if they really, really weren't people and no amount of trying would uncover their secret intellectual prowess? What if they were, but once the Tharansi recognized them they started demanding recompense for their abductees, or from the emlood for having wanted to colonize their world? What if they were people, but the emlood didn't care, and the Tharansi weren't convinced in time? And then weighing it against emlood concepts that would not, would never, match, rumbly strange guesses about what people Roon had not met would think based solely on its half-soul's guidance. And on top of that translating it back for Quinn. No wonder it was taking so long. The surprise was more that their conversations were usually swifter.

"Quinn," said Roon, "I have an idea, but you are going to hate it."

"Here I hoped you were going to have a plan that had no drawbacks at all," said Quinn. "Out with it, what have you thought up?"

"I think that you should go to the planet," said Roon, "and bring rictic along with you."

It was a crazy idea. Roon couldn't come along, since it was a usually stationary installation, and machine translation wasn't up to anything more complicated than asking where the bathroom was yet. It turned out that rictic could fly an emlood ship, but Quinn would have to stay in a single cabin with the pressure and atmosphere suited for humans, just zir and enough food and potable water to last for the week and a half the trip would take. Zie would have to use an emlood toilet, and the less said about that the better; it was from a certain angle fortunate that the appliance would work for Quinn, or even a fully mobile human, at all.

From another angle it was profoundly unlucky because it meant that Quinn had been talked into this crazy idea and was now locked in the only room of a ship with breathable air, using a stack of pallets containing assorted instant porridge and bottled water as a table to prop up what would at home live on zir nightstand.

Quinn hadn't expected this to work at all. Surely the Commission wouldn't want zir going somewhere with nobody but rictic for company to a planet that the emlood hadn't even colonized yet. Surely the emlood would be restricting landings on space ant turf. Quinn didn't even have an environment suit fitted, so presumably any rock the emlood wanted to live on would kill zir if zie tried to float out into its atmosphere.

Not so. By some emlood process, Roon and rictic convinced important emlood to supply and authorize the trip. The closest Roon came to explaining it was that it would look bad and impair the diplomatic project if they wouldn't let even ambassadors see. The

Commission gracefully acquiesced when Roon told them that there was a fact-finding mission for which Quinn's presence was required. And the planet had air that would be intolerably, but not *fatally*, thick and muggy and methane-laced for Quinn. Zie had an airmask to make particularly sure. It was temporarily survivable for emlood too, though they were planning to sterilize the ecosystem and replace it for their comfort in that as other domains. The gravity would be hard for a human to walk in, but, well. Quinn didn't walk, and it wasn't bad enough to make it hard to breathe.

Quinn sent Roon encrypted letters, most days of the trip. But it was somehow much harder than talking to it in person. Quinn didn't know why. Roon didn't have any body language unless you counted twitching a camera in its aperture for a better angle. Maybe Quinn was usually relying on *it* being able to read *zir* mannerisms and tone a lot more than zie expected. Letters were at least better than nothing, though, and especially important for things like "can you get rictic to look into the climate control system, it's boiling in here" and "no, tell it I'm fine, I just knocked over a pile of snacks and swore a lot about it". Quinn knew more of rictic's language than rictic knew English and that wasn't saying much, so transmitting letters to and from their mutual diplomat was actually faster than trying to pick through a collage of emlood letters and punctuation marks and hoping that conveyed what zie meant adequately.

The trip was somehow overstimulating and stultifyingly dull at the same time. The emlood ship was *loud*. There were so many high-pitched noises emlood couldn't hear that they hadn't designed away. Quinn's room had an air recycler and it was sealed off from the rest, but the temperature conducted through the walls was enough that zie was constantly sweating and eventually decided to go naked since nobody was looking at zir anyway. Zie should have sprung for a chair upgrade that would let zir cool it off directly to suck some heat out of zir thighs. And there was nowhere to go and nothing to do. Zie didn't often nip out for a recreational float around the block, or even go shopping in person, but being completely unable to

escape these six walls was threatening to drive zir mad. Perhaps it would have been better if the climate control issue weren't manifesting as a desire for "fresh air". Was Roon having this problem and just being quiet about it? Quinn'd have to ask later.

Quinn tried to read books, watch movies, play games, anything, but zie was too cranky and too confined to enjoy them. Trying to concentrate on anything while perseverating on the space ants was an exercise in frustration.

Zie wound up sleeping a lot. It helped a little with the soul-aches, and a lot with passing the time. Zie had unsettled dreams full of fuzzy millipedes, dying to a sterilizer, falling to the ground, their bodies spelling out words in a language no one would ever learn again.

They approached the planet with their plan all worked out with Roon in advance. Since interplanetary comms were fast but not instant, they wouldn't be able to course-correct with it in real time. Quinn was going to land in a human-designed, autopilot-capable shuttle, which had spent the trip magnetized to the ship's hull. Meanwhile rictic would remain aloft and wait to be signaled, or for two days, whichever came first. If Quinn signaled, zie'd do it from the shuttle, by preference, and then come up in it once rictic was on the lookout for an intercept. If zie couldn't signal from the ship zie'd do it from a device temporarily attached to zir chair and rictic would direct the shuttle to zir location, or if necessary land the entire ship to collect zir itself. If zie didn't signal at all, it would land and set out on a manhunt, tracking the device's location. Without satellites this planet didn't have yet, it wouldn't be very accurate, but Roon assured Quinn that rictic was very committed to zir safety.

As far as getting to the shuttle went, Quinn's strategy for getting through the emlood atmosphere to the airlock hatch was: wear goggles and hold zir breath. The stuff they breathed wasn't *that* bad,

and the dash wasn't that long, and none of zir ability to move fast depended on zir ability to breathe freely.

Zie felt a little like zie might throw up, which *would* complicate an attempt to hold zir breath, but zie'd brought half a pharmacy's worth of meds just in case because there was no way to take a doctor along on this ridiculous excursion. Zie took an antinausea pill and waited fifteen minutes for no reason and then, ready as zie'd ever be, sealed the goggles over zir eyes and undid the safety locks on zir cabin door. In the corridor - if you wanted to call it a corridor - rictic was waiting to conduct zir in case something went wrong, but Quinn made it to the hatch just fine.

When everything was sealed and double-checked and found according to plan, the shuttle took off.

This part of the journey, also, was long. Not as long as the interstellar portion, but shuttles didn't just pop up and down like elevators. Quinn watched the space ant planet come into view by degrees. Zir chair anchored to the reference frame of the shuttle so zie scarcely felt the acceleration. Zie put music on. Tried to sleep through it and failed because zie was so overstocked on rest.

The shuttle came to a stop on the surface of the planet a reasonable floating distance from a population center of space ants. Quinn would have preferred to go observe a group of them who hadn't recently had a bunch of their number kidnapped by other visitors from the stars, but unfortunately, hoping to cover their bases thoroughly in checking for souls, the Tharansi had sampled individuals from the entire space-ant-inhabited part of the planet, which was most of the northern subtropical band and a fertile-crescent kind of place leading north from there. Since Quinn could not use this criterion zie was instead landing in the place with the nicest (to humans) weather, one of the northernmost hives where it would only be thirty-five degrees centigrade at high noon.

The shuttle settled for a moment, waiting to deactivate until its subsidence detectors were confident it had chosen a stable patch of ground. Then it switched its engines off and released the clamps on the hatch.

Quinn suited up and floated out.

Zie had landed two miles away from the hive, or the city, whatever you wanted to call it. Far enough away that based on the Tharansi and emlood observations Roon had to work with, there wouldn't be any locals - any of the disputed animals - any of *them* right there to witness the landing. It was unclear how good their distance vision was, but since Quinn wouldn't have any trouble floating two miles over nice flat terrain and would have started to run into battery trouble if it were twenty this was the site they'd picked out.

The place stank. The mask Quinn wore wasn't rated for completely replacing zir inhalations with Earth-grade air; it was there to supplement oxygen and filter out particulates and trace objectionable gases. It did nothing about the smell. Without any way to be sure what specifically was contributing which flavor of wet brown stink that suffused the air zie couldn't even steer around particularly offensive plants. Or animals. The animals didn't flee from Quinn. They didn't know what zie was. Planets with herbivorous sapients like the Green Fuzzies tended to have bolder wildlife, and ones with particularly inhuman residents - like, Quinn supposed, the fuzzy millipedes zie was here to meet - sometimes left their creatures willing to go right up to human visitors, for better or for worse.

Nothing was so bold as to leap onto Quinn's person, which was good, because zie hadn't actually suited up for that eventuality.

Zie floated southeast, checking zir compass now and then. It wasn't a real compass - the planet didn't have that kind of magnetosphere -

just a doodad with an accelerometer that would by dead reckoning figure out which way zie was facing. It was good enough.

There weren't roads. Zie was drifting along above spiral-leafed plants, the distinctions between their several types quite lost on zir. They were at least green. The whole place was very green. Perhaps emlood thought it was cute but that wasn't, evidently, going to give them any pause in razing it to the ground.

Grasses taller than Quinn grew in copses zie slalomed around. Drooping ropes of viridian needles hung from twisty red trunks. Moss-stuff writ large enough to brush the bottom of the chair partially hid busy flocks of many-limbed pink things.

There weren't roads, but there were farms, if you wanted to call them farms. They were at least fairly consistent swathes of specific plants. And something that could be a town, if you squinted. Quinn squinted. Zie didn't have anything better to do, here.

Roon had said this would help but had struggled to articulate why. It hadn't even sounded very confident.

It wasn't that the place didn't look like a town, Quinn mused as zie drew closer. It did. It had paths between the structures, and buildings, and they were made of mud but humans had once built with mud too. Still did sometimes, if they were dedicated reenactors. But there was an organic quality to the mounds that made Quinn imagine it was built by the space ants - millipedes, whatever - chewing up wood pulp or something, and spitting it into place. Birds' nests, termite mounds, those big hives that Tharansi lizard-things built in the ambassadorial neighborhood before the groundskeepers knocked them down. (Quinn wasn't sure what the groundskeepers had against them; the lizards were harmless and pretty cute.)

Quinn got closer, chair brushing the tops of alien plants and releasing more smells, bright sour ones and harsh bitter ones and one that made zir imagine a rose farting. Beavers reshaped the land

around them too, zie knew. Ants, literal Earth ants, built hills and tunnels, waged war, farmed aphids or leaf fungus - and they were still ants.

The millipedes weren't hostile, and the plan was for Quinn to approach quite close to the settlement, but it was always possible that they'd learned to be hostile when a bunch of them were kidnapped and failed to make diplomats. Had the Tharansi tried all the possibilities? Was there a 'splal being paid hush money? An emlood, doing due diligence before their species laid waste to all this malodorous green? The conservationist groups had a point, thought Quinn, it would be a shame even if these were just dumb bugs.

Zie could see some of the millipedes as zie crossed the innermost farms. There was a texture to the outside of their structures, rough ridges, so even if they didn't have the clingy feet Earth bugs had, they could climb up the sides and into the windows; they were doing it. Quinn could see them looking at zir with their three-eyed faces, and then skittering away, often without turning around first. Maybe they echolocated or were using smell to navigate or just knew their way around really well. They didn't approach zir chair.

Quinn couldn't blame them. If they were just bugs, fuzzy bugs the size of anacondas with a hundred feet apiece, then avoiding unfamiliar weird-smelling creatures still made sense as an instinct. The other animals hadn't run from zir but who knew what ecological niches these things occupied? If the millipedes were people - well, then it was smart of them, zie supposed.

Whatever they were, they weren't high-tech. Quinn didn't see evidence of fire, let alone electricity. Honestly, it had been pretty generous of the Tharansi to check these guys. They didn't appear to have textiles, pottery, sharp rocks, or wheels. Just crops, in loose blobby shapes - neither the circles and rectangles humans favored nor neatly tiling emlood rectangles, but maybe something else

farmed that way, zie didn't know. And their termite mounds, with windows they ducked through to hide from Quinn.

It was so quiet. No sounds, Violet had said. Chemical writing, like ants - sign language - bees did that.

One millipede came into view as Quinn drifted through the town that was slower. Maybe it couldn't hear zir approach. Actually, maybe they were all deaf. It was in the middle of the wiggly lane between two hives, and Quinn came closer, thinking of checking to see if every other one of its feet on one side was purple. Silly. They'd killed Violet's would-be co-ambassador.

This one was a cool dim green-blue, like being six feet under the sea in the sunshine. None of its feet were purple, they were just black with little flecks of turquoise. It turned around and Quinn realized it didn't have eyes at all. There were scars across its face, like something had scratched it badly and it had healed but was now blind.

Blind animals didn't live very long, did they? Wild ones, at any rate. Ones belonging to species that were supposed to be able to see. This one was right now failing to run from something all its neighbors had been scared of.

Maybe blind bees could work in the hive, in the dark.

This millipede wasn't in the dark. It was standing in the street with its fuzz waving gently in the hot fragrant wind. Some of the others were peeking out of the nearest windows, looking at Quinn and at the blind one.

"I'm not going to hurt it," said Quinn. None of them reacted. Probably they couldn't hear. Why weren't they raising some kind of chemical alarm for the blind one? Had its nose been damaged too?

Zie got within a few feet of the eyeless millipede. It was a pretty color. Maybe the nature conservationists were the wrong tactic here and the kidnappers should have been appealing to furriers. Save the species by turning the individuals into coats.

Quinn was close enough to see that the blue-green millipede was - eating. Chewing, very slowly, with its creepy mouthparts. Zie was close enough to see over it, and - that was another millipede, dead in the street, butchered, and the blind one was eating some organ of the dead one. Was nobody warning it that Quinn was right there because it was a murderer and they wanted to see what zie'd do to it? Was it just really *really* rude to interrupt cannibalism?

The blind millipede moved away from Quinn. Maybe it felt zir shadow on its fur, or smelled zir, or it had nothing to do with Quinn at all. Zie could have darted forward and buried a hand in its fuzz, but even if zie'd been sure it wasn't poisonous, zie didn't want to trust its peaceability that far. The mouthparts looked sharp.

It took ten minutes to finish eating. It disappeared the last bites of its grisly meal, and instantly, the air from every direction suddenly stank of rust and vinegar. Quinn could taste it, like vomiting up blood, or biting into a chemical battery. Zie gagged. The blind millipede ran. It raced up the side of a corrugated burrow and plunged into a window. The city streets were at last completely deserted.

Quinn sat there, unmoving, in the middle of the city. Zie thought zie could hear evidence of some millipedes sneaking out back windows, but zie didn't scoot around to try to catch them at it. Maybe they needed to do farm work. Maybe they got cabin fever. Maybe they had alien millipede emotions which cashed out to the same thing.

The sun descended. When it got near the horizon and the shadows were stretched across the ground, zie went back to the meadow

where zir shuttle was parked and boarded it. Smelled blessedly inoffensive air with a grateful sigh.

On the way back to Tharan Prime, Quinn wrote to Roon about everything zie'd seen. Zie wasn't a very organized writer, and everything came together out of order with followups like "And another thing about -" or "I forgot to mention that -", but Roon didn't have any problems with it that it saw fit to tell Quinn about.

How was this supposed to help? Quinn asked.

And Roon answered, *Complicated emlood legal precedent, but I'll also try to get somewhere with the evidence you saw yourself.*

Surely the emlood and the Tharansi both had seen enough millipede settlements to satisfy every curiosity they thought was worth indulging. But maybe that wasn't very much. Maybe the Tharansi only wanted to learn about people by hearing them translated by diplomats. Maybe the emlood would have been perfectly happy to exterminate stone age fuzzy people if the Tharansi didn't have rules about that sort of thing and they didn't care about what it implied that they practiced funerary cannibalism and kept their blind friends alive.

What're the odds? Quinn asked, but zie didn't expect a good answer for that. Zie'd never been good at putting numbers to things, and even if emlood figuring was identical - perhaps it was, but who knew? - zir counterpart wouldn't have been filtered on math skills either.

I don't know. I'm very new at everything I'm trying to do and there is a lot of it. It's worth trying.

"There is a lot of it" sounded like "stop writing me letters if they aren't important, I'm really busy" to Quinn. Zie failed at putting on a

movie marathon. Failed at reading books. Eventually wrote Commissioner Zalas, instead of Roon.

Visit to planet went off without a hitch. I don't really understand what Roon's trying to do but if it has the weight of a Commission strongly worded letter to put behind whatever it is, you should tell it so. Are there any of the millipede guys on Tharan Prime? Can you ask one of the Tharansi diplomats?

Commissioner Zalas wasn't a prompt letter-writer. He had a habit of checking his messages once in the morning and once at the end of his workday. It was perhaps admirable that he left work at work but it left Quinn, whose sleep schedule had not survived the trip, fretting awake for the next twelve hours after hitting send.

Looking into it was all the reply said, when it came.

Quinn made a loud irritated noise, confirmed that this hadn't caused zir shipmate to write their diplomat to find out if zie was dying, and put on the most mindless cartoons zie could find in zir media storage to stare at until zir brains dribbled out zir ears. Zie fell asleep to the theme song of Octopus Girl and Captain Cuttle. Zie dreamed that the dynamic duo met mer-millipedes and killed them all and turned them into coats and ate their organs, explaining to the camera that they used every part of the soulless animals.

Back on Tharan Prime, Quinn went for a high-speed turn around the neighborhood zie lived in. The security guys had to follow zir on scooters to avoid losing zir on the uphill portions where they lost footspeed. When zie went back home to recharge the chair and check zir messages, Zalas had finally responded.

Neem says the specimens were terminated but not discarded. Why?

Longshot, said Quinn. *Any joy on finding my kidnappers?*

They caught the one with the beard. Others still on the lam.

I need to talk to the beard one then.

Why?

Ambassador reasons.

Quinn got an armed escort and swung by the lockup where Hooded Villain, divested now of his hood, was cooling his heels. Apparently his real name was Chester. Quinn hated this name and resolved to continue to think of him as Hooded Villain forever.

"Ambassador," said Hooded Villain, puzzled, when Quinn floated into view.

"In the flesh. Where's the would've-been-also-an-ambassador who was with you?"

"In the wind."

"- Look, I'm not trying to get her arrested, I wouldn't cry about it but that's not why I'm here. Does she have a burner email she might be checking? A sibling she might be in touch with even now? Would she watch an ad if I took it out in an episode of Galaxy's Greatest Hits? Help me out."

"Why?" asked Hooded Villain, if anything more confused now.

"I want to ask her to a candlelit dinner, of course," snapped Quinn. "Look, I just have something to tell her, I think she'd want to hear it, how can I let her know?"

Hooded Villain looked meaningfully at the guards. They didn't move an inch.

"Yeah, they're a little jumpy since I got kidnapped, I can't imagine why. Write it on a scrap of paper and pass it to me or something if

you don't want them seeing that she put emoji eggplants in her email address."

With what Quinn thought was unnecessary ponderousness, Hooded Villain did as zie'd asked. Zie secreted the note away in zir shirt pocket without letting the guards or the cameras get a clear look at it.

Back in zir house, and finally alone, zie hopped onto zir neighbor's wireless network for that extra delay in track-covering, and emailed Violet, apparently also known as "barleygirlinabarleyworld".

Roon is trying something, but it's not remotely guaranteed. I have a stupid idea.

Violet answered that evening, while Quinn was eating dinner that wasn't any of the things zie'd thought to pack for the trip to millipedeworld. *Your mail is being watched.*

Yep. Stand by.

Because, Quinn was pretty sure, *rictic's* mail was not being watched. Nobody had kidnapped it. It wasn't acting erratic after having spoken to pollitical extremists. And it was studying English just as much as Quinn was studying its own language, if not more. Conversational, no. Capable of sending an email if Roon spelled it out letter by letter? Probably. Violet could read around a few typos.

Quinn went in to Roon's room and had a completely ordinary ambassador-diplomat conversation, fully on record, about nothing relevant to millipedes at all. On the emlood planet they sometimes enjoyed cold currents in their oceans the way humans liked hot springs. An emlood typically had two biological parents but under some circumstances could wind up with four or six, though it did have to be an even number. Eight had been achieved but only artificially and only once. Roon thought that emlood number chants weren't too dissimilar from the way some humans - though not

Quinn, alas - enjoyed watching videos of people mixing colorful paints together, but that was a supposition about a supposition. Perhaps the next human ambassador to the emlood would have to be a watching-paint-mix sort of person to shed more light on this similarity.

And then Quinn asked for the recording to stop, and told Roon what zie wanted to send to Violet.

Violet showed up outside the Tharansi biological lab in disguise and with a rock in one shoe to throw off her gait. The Tharansi were no great shakes at telling humans apart, but it was possible they had footage or a photo of her somewhere, from when they'd recruited her to try to be an ambassador, plus Quinn had given a description of all the kidnapers when zie was first released. So, new hair color, outfit from the opposite corner of her wardrobe. It didn't have to last all that long.

Quinn was there ostensibly to visit the zoo, which they had attached to the same facility, and zir guards were hanging back so as not to spook the Mmiikan-homeworld racing turtles, which hated crowds. The Tharansi didn't charge admission. They met at the exhibit right next to the turtles, with Quinn supervising the long-horned ray-like sea creatures from Tharan Secundus and Violet fixing her eyes on a bug that would eventually fly close enough to the water to be struck, electrocuted, and eaten.

They didn't have to talk. Roon had relayed everything. Quinn led Violet through the zoo, looking at different animals on opposite sides of the switchback path that led sequentially through the zoo's contents. It went uphill by slow gradual degrees. The top of it was actually on the roof of the lab building, with the north wall backed up against the slope where all the exhibits were kept. Quinn had read, when looking up facts about the layout of the place, that there were tunnels through that hill into corresponding lab facility floors.

A garden full of Green-Fuzzy-world's answer to butterflies wasn't enclosed. On Tharan Prime they didn't get any of the environmental cues that would normally tell them to fly any distance, so they were sluggishly decorative, waiting for migration season their whole lives, letting visitors pet their bristly abdomens. And the tunnel to the third floor began in their exhibit, so that they could be brought into the lab and obliged to breed artificially lest the zoo run out of sleepy ornaments.

Quinn floated in like zie owned the place. The door wasn't hidden, if you'd spent any time around Tharansi doors, and it wasn't locked, either. Zie went right through, Violet at zir back.

In the corridor they really had to book it. Locked, no - Tharansi mostly didn't lock things just because people weren't supposed to go into them, since they didn't expect people to try doors till they had a rash of incidents with some specific one. Not many folks were interested in entering the space-butterfly-breeding room unless they were on an authorized behind the scenes tour. But there were certain to be people around. They had to be quick, and avoid being seen - till the critical moment, when they wanted a lot of witnesses.

Tharansi didn't do elevators. Fortunately, Quinn brought zir own. In the central column of empty air that the building's central ramp spiraled around, zie dropped, sickeningly, till zie spotted the floor zie wanted. Specimen freezers. Violet sprinted down the ramp behind. Zie'd meet her in a moment.

There were a lot of specimens, but the fuzzy millipedes were bigger than most things the Tharansi were keeping on ice. They had it all behind glass, with sliding doors. It was dark, but zie had a flashlight.

And a meat cleaver.

Zie was in luck. There, bagged and tagged and frozen solid, was the specific millipede zie'd hoped for, third from the top of a stack of them. Every other foot stained purple. Did it look friendly? Frankly,

Quinn couldn't see it, but the important thing was that Violet could, and had.

Zie pulled it out of the stack. There was a sussurus of Tharansi activity behind zir now, they were alive to the intrusion, so zie didn't worry about the clatter as cold corpses cascaded to the tiles below. Zie knifed the bag, tugged the fore half of the dead millipede out, and heaved the cleaver over zir head, leaning crazily out of zir chair to bring the blade down hard enough. Chop, chop, hack, the sick thunk - the vibrating blade helped against the icy stiffness of the rust-brown innards, but it wasn't quite as fast as zie'd hoped. The cleaver went through unexpectedly far on the next swing and blunted itself on the floor. No matter, zie could see the organ zie wanted now. Quinn pried it loose with zir bare hands.

Violet had caught up at last. She was panting, flushed, but her eyebrows were drawn down in determination. She held out her hand.

Quinn handed her the hunk of crystallized tissue. It had taken the blind millipede a while to eat, but they had small mouths.

Violet swallowed it whole. Probably it tore up her throat. Certainly it was inadvisably cold. It didn't matter. She was expecting this to kill her just because food from another planet was almost always toxic. She was willing to get herself killed doing it.

Quinn gazed up at the ceiling as the Tharansi biologists closed in.

"Did it work?" Roon asked, later, after all the interrogations, all the psych eval sessions, after Violet's funeral.

"I will assert that it did forever," said Quinn.

"I'm not recording."

"I think it worked," said Quinn again, quieter. "I think that's what the blind one was doing. Eating the dead one's soul. I reckon Violet died a diplomat."

"But she *would* have lied about it," said Roon. "If it hadn't worked. She'd have pretended till her heart collapsed and then kept doing it after they defibrillated her until the minute they couldn't keep her alive."

"Probably. That wouldn't mean they weren't people, though, it'd mean - that I was wrong about what the cannibalism was for, or that it doesn't work if a human eats it, or that she and her millipede weren't that compatible after all."

"Or that they're not people."

"Or that. It'll buy them time to prove it. It'll get the 'splal trying to decipher their chemicals. Better them than me, they smelled hideous."

"Would you have done it?" Roon asked, after a silence.

"Done - what, swallowed the -"

"If Violet had gotten caught before she could, yes. You have a soul gap too, if anything more of one than she had. If that's even necessary - the blind one didn't look to you like it had had part of the relevant organ taken out first, did it -"

"It didn't, no... I don't think it would've cohered with me. I'm a reasonably generic ambassador candidate, but - I just didn't vibe with the millipedes much. They stank. I didn't think they looked friendly. Violet had the better shot."

"But would you have done it?"

"I don't know."

It's not a pleasant admission. Roon's in some ways very young. In most ways, really - lots of life experience, but about a totally different pair of lives than the one it led. It had very little experience with being a bridge between species, with being a white box of electronics built on an ancient Tharansi ritual to let two subspecies negotiate borders and trade routes or whatever it was premodern Tharansi had wanted to talk about. It was sort of like a teenager, accustomed to existing but not ready to do it without support yet.

Or so Quinn imagined. Zie still had plenty to learn from Roon about what it was like to be it, what it was like to be emlood. They had a job to do.

"I wouldn't want to leave you," Quinn added after the lull in the conversation had gone on long enough. "But - there've got to be millions of them. You'd - I know you'd miss me, but."

"I'll have to do without you one day. But not yet. Please," said Roon. "You're my other half."

"You'd still have your other, other half."

"Yes. But I need both of you. We're only just starting."

"There's no use wondering what I would've done. Violet got there in time. She got to - to meet her friendly millipede." Quinn scrubbed at zir eye. "Or at least got to pretend to enough to head off the colonization. - would your plan have worked, do you think."

Pause. "No. I don't think it would have."

"Then -"

"Then it's good that Violet caught up with you. And didn't choke or throw up. And was a good actress, or a good enough ambassador-slash diplomat. I just keep wondering, what if it'd had to be you. I

don't know what you'd do in that situation. I don't remember being you in any situations like that."

"I don't know either. I didn't have a plan for the contingency, just this one crazy idea. But here we are."

"I'm glad you're all right."

"All right, nothing, I get flashbacks to the millipede planet whenever I let my leftovers sit too long -"

Roon laughed. "Ask me something about emlood," it said.

"Do they let food get moldy?" asked Quinn at once.

"The taxon on their planet isn't exactly mold, of course, but there are some simple organisms that will grow on things they eat. They can digest most of those too, though, very few of them are outright toxic to emlood - they'll cultivate different ones, like humans do with cheese - but there are exceptions. They're regional, though, they don't adapt quickly enough to wind up spreading across the whole civilization the way some things do on Earth. There's pretty extreme weather variation on their planet and they'll live underground to avoid most of it, but seldom ship food very far..."

"We should be recording, for this part."

"Oh, you're right. There we go, let me just repeat myself boringly for the microphone."

Quinn listened as Roon explained emlood dietary practices and food storage and then drifted to their cargo handling procedures in general. Not long after, rictic joined them, rumbling along, and Quinn was treated to glimpses of how odd emlood found the concept of soup, the shape of the standard shipping container.

Zie could do this for the rest of zir life.

Rat King

To the honorable Mr. and Mrs. Tiller on the occasion of the birth of their sixth child:

We congratulate you on this accomplishment. Please update us at your earliest convenience as to what increase in aid packages we can expect as a result of the addition to your labor force. Ourselves, we have seen an undisclosed but considerably larger number of new additions to the constituency this year and our needs are commensurately increased.

Signed, Chiravis the Rat King

To His Highness Chiravis the Rat King

As you might recall if you have access to the records of your predecessors, our children take a considerable time to produce more than they consume. The odds of our happy news yielding any more agricultural surplus at all, instead of what would represent both a deadweight loss economically and a devastating personal loss for our leadership, will be greatly improved if there is less tourism within parts of the residential building frequented by Mrs. Tiller and the infant. It is unlikely that any rat living today will see the fruits of this politesse in terms of reduced risk of local epidemic, but for the sake of your grandchildren, perhaps your subjects will see the rational self interest in remaining in areas specified by the Fourteenth Treaty, as vulnerable members of the population are seldom in the barn and the fields. Particular caution is warranted in the silo, however, as some reckless elements of the rat population who we assume are acting without their government's authorization have violated the Fourteenth Treaty provision against leaving droppings in any part of the described area which may contact strategic reserves of grain for

the Tiller populace. At Your Majesty's convenience we would be happy to have a meeting clarifying the regulatory structures around access to the silo.

Sincerely, Mr. Tiller

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Tiller,

I am afraid no renegotiation of the silo is possible. Gleaning has been particularly difficult in the recent weather and as I am sure you are aware access to a food supply is an existential matter for my people. I can issue strongly worded announcements regarding the etiquette associated with the visit but wonder if perhaps you are unfamiliar with some of the biological constraints faced by, particularly, our young and inexperienced, which we have many more of than you. Surely you do not mean to suggest that dozens of rat children should be starved to protect a singular Tiller child from a consequence that is in any event dubious; I have soundly scolded my advisors who have suggested such unsavory interpretations of your requests and will be delighted to show them your clarification. Thank you in advance for your accommodating us.

Yours, Chiravis the Rat King

Eyes only for Chiravis the Rat King

I don't care what you have to tell your ratlings or your secretaries or anyone else, but if you or yours poop in the silo and I catch you at it one more time, I'm voiding Treaty Twelve.

Sincerely, Mrs. Tiller

Dear Mr. and Mrs Tiller,

Please forgive the presumption of my reminder that the acquisition of any animals of the types listed in Treaty Twelve would additionally violate Treaty Two, the dissolution of which I believe would be equally tragic for both signatories. I simply do not have the police capacity to achieve the standards you have set, any more than you are able to prevent the more mobile of your children from terrorizing some of my more outgoing subjects with loud noises and large feet. Would that all monarchs could enforce perfect behavior from their subjects, but alas, it is impossible. I hope that with some time to reflect you will come to the same conclusion that I have, which is that all treaties must remain in effect.

With that in mind, please note that winter's approach means that we are owed bedding and access for certain frailer parties to the hearth, with some interest from last year's shortfall. We are so pleased to have been in a position to extend you this loan as a symbol of the goodwill between our peoples, and glad especially given that the winter promises to be hard to have such staunch allies as yourselves from whom we may receive such gifts.

Yours, Chiravis the Rat King

Respectfully to Chiravis the Rat King,

Please forgive any suggestion that we would consider any treaties invalidated without the proper procedures. Naturally, if any such amendments proved necessary, diplomacy having broken down in a way that I venture only lesser kings than yourself might ever allow, we would bring in arbitration rather than take any unilateral action. I have taken the liberty of writing to the office of our First Treaty's designated mediator to confirm their availability, though I have assured them that it is tremendously unlikely that either of us may be driven to that point.

Of course I have no expectation that your control over your subjects is absolute. You are a generous and benevolent king, not a cruel tyrant. Still, I wonder if perhaps you have assigned silo ventures to the most responsible of your rats? Perhaps it is at present not taken very seriously, and a task given to junior or feckless individuals whose character might be better suited to something with fewer implications. Alternately, perhaps you would be willing to forego direct access to the silo in exchange for a larger ration left in the trading post. I urge you to consider creative solutions to this problem, as it is one of particular importance to us.

Regards, Mr. Tiller

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Tiller,

There will be absolutely no need to call in arbitration about this matter. Please forgive my poor attempts at communication; I can only hope I will be more successful with impressing upon my people about the seriousness of the matter you describe. The Crown Prince expected to take my position this coming spring at the latest has proposed that a systematic coprophagic sweep of the silo following visits from any less than perfectly professional rats might be satisfactory to both of our needs. Kindly let me know directly without troubling yourself to involve any third parties if this is not a solution you find acceptable and in keeping with the terms of the treaties.

Yours, Chiravis the Rat King

Dear Chiravis the Rat King,

Please find at the trading post the bedding you requested. If it is inadequate you are as always entitled to supplement with straw as necessary. The lambing season this year was not as fruitful as our optimistic projections and so the quality may be variable, but it is

offered with the best of hopes for your warmth and comfort in these coming months.

Regarding the hearth, kindly remind your subjects that it is imperative that access during nighttime hours be silent - not only squeaking but also footsteps, particularly quick and frantic footsteps, have the potential to disturb sleeping occupants of the household who are, of necessity, themselves quite close to the fire. We are aware that the cold night is the highest priority time for you to access the warmth we share and mention this requirement as a prophylactic against the incidents last year which resulted in such a troubled episode in your father's reign. If the Prince's clever idea regarding sanitation in the silo is successful in that sphere we can look into adding a rug to make the constraints on how visitors to the hearth may walk and run less onerous under similar conditions. Please send him our sincerest congratulations on his precocious contributions to the peace between our peoples.

Sincerely, Mr. & Mrs. Tiller

Dear Chiravis the Rat King,

soon I am going to School. I am going to be a Wizard. the Wizard who came to our Farm said so. he had a Toad in his Pocket. I think this is a Wizard Thing to have a Pocket Friend. my Mother says that it is in the third Treaty that all the Stuff we leave around for Rats is (one) to get all of the Rats to give us Privacy in parts of the House where we want to be alone, but also (two) if we think of Things that Rats can do for us we are paying for those Things with the Food and Wool and the not having any Cats. so, I have thought of a Thing. I would like a Rat to be my Pocket Friend. I would most especially like it if the Rat is a Princess. I think it is good when there are Princesses in Places such as my Pocket. please send me a Princess to go in my Pocket away to School with me.

Sincerely, Beff Tiller

Dear Beff Tiller,

I am overjoyed to dispatch this letter to you in the care of my fourteenth daughter Princess Reeinuchu, who will be your loyal friend and familiar in honor of the many generations of fruitful collaboration between our peoples. Please take care of her for me; she is one of my favorites. And please ask your next youngest brother to construct his piles of rocks in your kitchen garden more soundly. I don't like to bother your parents with every little thing, but some of the youngsters do like to climb them and have had close calls with collapsing cairns.

Best wishes,

Chiravis the Rat King

Gentle

I am perishing hot in my psychic's uniform, and it would be the height of rudeness to leave the ball before being introduced to every one of the debutantes being put forward here this Summer.

To be clear, this has nothing to do with my being in the offing for one such debutante. I am already courting, all but betrothed to, my beloved Miss Nirecel Davit, daughter of Lord Lessiven. Rather, I was invited to this event - implored to go - to make up the numbers after a scandalous elopement and a circulation of a nasty flu cut down the guest list. I will not marry the young woman seated to my left who is in animated conversation with the young law student on her own left, but I might spend twenty seconds opposite her when the dancing is underway, and my absence would dreadfully inconvenience her. I do not begrudge the favor; my aunt is the hostess and I am on leave without other plans but to enmesh myself in the Summer festivities.

The soup course is refreshingly cool. It is not refreshing enough to prevent my agitated thoughtforms from bouncing off the other minds in the room. I am not the only psychic here, but I am the strongest. At least, so I believe. A strong psychic is not made obvious by his powerful presence in the mindscape of the room. He commands no attention unless that is how he's chosen to strike. The conspicuous ones, the flying fish and the leaping dolphins of the mind's sea, are minor talents. I swim deeper. If I am right, no one can tell that I'm fretful. If I'm wrong, I am very obvious to some abyssal whale.

No such whales are attending in uniform, at least. My emanations bounce off the minds close to me and then a moment later off the farther ones in a patter of impressions. A mess of the expected excitement - innocent and otherwise - from the young hopefuls. My

aunt's obsessive focus on the minutiae of arranging introductions and timing all the events of the party correctly. I sense headaches, but also indigestion, aching feet, faltering hearts - these things aren't the mind, but the mind is the relay station where they can be made known to me.

None of this is interesting. If I weren't all but melting into the upholstery beneath me I would have no trouble marshaling my pulses, reading no minds but my own. A psychic instinctively seeks refuge from the body when the body is disagreeable. I am not finding much refuge here. The happiest participants are enamored young things and proud parents. No one is physically comfortable, nor better yet, asleep. I focus back on myself by brute force rather than spend another moment meditating by proxy on the charms of a girl ten years my junior or participating in some poor father's liver complaint. Training as a psychic is a little like learning for the first time it is possible to slouch. It opens up entirely new ways to lose track of yourself and wind up with a poor reputation and a backache.

It is far too hot. I gulp water. The ballroom has a bit more of a breeze coming through, at least.

"Augur Harwisht!" says the lady on my right, a chaperone and not a debutante herself.

I cannot remember her name (she probably read mine off the embroidery on my coat), but I am a psychic. "Lady Ittane! How are you finding the soup?"

"I gave it a pinch of salt and then it was perfect. Augur, have you met my niece -"

"Ah, I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

I endure about a minute and a half of niece-themed puffery before I have an opportunity to mention that I should love to one day have

the chance to introduce her to my Nirecel. Niece and aunt both withdraw from the dead end with respectable grace and move on as the seating arrangement permits. I would recommend them my brother, except I am not blessed with such a relation.

The remaining courses are not chosen with such regard to the weather and I suffer through them, mind escaping me every few bites to alight on cramps and ill-fitting shoes and someone's skin breaking out in mild hives in response to the glaze on the leg of lamb. What I wouldn't give for a dozy toddler in his mother's lap to drift away with. Or a merciful breeze. It would be unthinkably rude to start manifesting the temperature here at my aunt's ball, and yet I am thinking it.

The trouble with manifesting is that it's much harder to control even than my passive telepathic attention. If I learn a scandalous secret, my discretion suffices for there to be no harm done. If I start slinging essence of chill around a room because it's too hot, I will wind up with ice inside the walls ruining Auntie's wallpaper and frost decorating the dance floor until the cotillion becomes a collision course. That's if I don't kill anyone outright with hypothermia. It's best saved for the battlefield, even for people who are better than I am at the fine detail.

So I cope just like everyone else through to dessert and then line up for the dance. The musicians are behind a screen - a city fashion, you never see it in country estates - and can therefore dispense with some of their layers. I think based on the impressions wafting from them that the violinist may have actually taken off his shirt entirely. I can't be scattered like this and still keep up with the steps, unfortunately, so I crush myself back into my own head and smile at the lady opposite me.

I'm able to sit out a few of the songs after the first three, sipping water by the window and trying to catch as much breeze on my neck as I can. It smells like lilacs in the garden, and the remnants of

last night's thunderstorm. One more turn around the ballroom, once they're doing something slow, and it will be within my rights to beg off and leave the floor to gentlemen more hopeful with these ladies, or at least gentlemen with eligible brothers and cousins and friends to place in the ladies' paths. I can hear, or at least catch the echoes of, conversations just like that. Somebody's coaxed their hermit of a nephew to come to tea, perhaps Miss So-and-so would care to join them; is the young lady going to be at Such-and-such a concert, perhaps this fellow might see her again there. I was keenly interested in this social brouhaha myself not so very long ago, until Nirecel. But for all the importance of finding a suitable spouse, a lucky person only needs to do it once. I can't think of a single other thing people do only once that warrants this much maneuvering. Even funerals are less of a production.

"Augur Harwisht! Or may I call you Aust?"

I don't know this fellow's name either. How in the world did I manage not to offend everyone I knew every time I opened my mouth, before I began training? "Mr. Soumelend."

"You must know all the gossip, mustn't you?"

"What gossip?" I say. "Surely there's nothing to say that wouldn't be publicly announced, with such esteemed guests as my aunt's inclined to know."

"Come now, don't give me that. I'll make you a trade, how's about. I've heard that the deb in the blue with the great big bow in the back was found compromised not six days ago with a *Taydien* fellow."

"What a nasty rumor to repeat, Mr. Soumeland, I would have thought better of you." I wouldn't. Bouncing off his mind is a little like licking a tree trunk. It was not about to kill me and that was all that there was to be said for the experience. There is sweat in my

eye. I have been drinking so much water that I am now vividly imagining peeing on his shoe.

"It's only what I've heard. It'd be fair enough that your lady aunt wouldn't have caught wind yet, of course, I'm sure she overhears different things than I do. Now it's your turn, what have you got?"

"I've nothing," I reply.

"It says augur, just there on your lapel," laughs Mr. Soumeland. "I know that's at least a couple ranks above Junior Trainee Medium. You don't need to pretend to me you don't know more than anybody else in the room."

Psychics of any rank are tolerated at parties like this one, in rooms of people like these people, because we are discreet gentlemen of good reputation. What awaits a psychic who abuses his abilities in this or any context - even for the noblest of motives, warning a lady off a cad or a man off a bad investment - is only dubiously an improvement over summary execution. This isn't to say that we cannot give advice. I have met the fiancés of those of my sisters who became engaged after I began training my mind and I have registered my approval of them. But that was all it was: my approval. I could have disapproved for some grave and serious reason - or because I didn't care for the shape of his nose or his hippocampus. I provided no details. When I throw parties of my own I am sure many people take note of who I have chosen to include. But they have no idea if I have left someone out due to knowledge of wrongdoing or because I forgot altogether that they existed or because their cologne makes me sneeze, and they know better than to ask.

Mr. Soumeland may be innocently unaware what he is proposing I stake on his keenness for gossip. But he's hardly innocent of gossip himself.

"I must decline to say anything on the matter," I tell him.

"Nonsense. Is the uniform a fake, then?"

This is too far. I stand up immediately without quite meaning to. I am no longer my body, but the shape of the air in the room, lapping against the solid secrets of the people in it, the harpsichordist's indelicate itch and my aunt's monthlies and, yes, the terror of the debutante in blue with the enormous bow on her back, afeared she will have no chance to make a clean first impression on a gentleman who might like her enough to forgive the carelessness. My mind flings itself out in a low song and it throbs back into me full of emotions that are not mine as I involuntarily seek to flee from my own anger. It does not work. I am also thudding into this Mr. Soumeland, the presumptuous swine, who suggests that an officer must indulge his prurient prying or be no officer at all. His mind sticks out in the landscape of thought like a sharp rock in my shoe, so large as to be mysterious how it got there.

"Sir," I say, either very softly or in a shout, I am so out of myself I can scarcely tell, "I invite you to retract that suggestion, as you value your mind."

Psychics do not, as a rule, duel with swords or pistols. We're no more permitted to risk ourselves in this way than we are to use our powers to ruin scoundrels with rumor. If you duel a psychic, you do it in the realm of thought. But this doesn't mean that there's an overwhelming advantage for the psychic. After all, duelists must agree on a place as well as a time. And he cannot come to me, not with this choice of weapon - so I must go to him. I will have skill on him, to be sure, unless he is a remarkably stupid abyssal whale of a genius talent. But we will fight on his turf. This is not an inconsiderable factor.

It's just, I'm very good, and he was unforgivably rude.

I almost expect him to back off. It would be so much the rational thing to do, when his insult is so easily disproven, when he has

evinced some knowledge of psychic ranks and must have an inkling what mine signifies, when he has for some unfathomable reason been invited to my own aunt's debutante ball and will not be on her guest list in the future win or lose. But that is not what the shape of his mind says. He's hit the wine hard, and the foolishness harder. He's going to double down.

"Swords," he says, lips thin in a smirk, with one word suggesting that I'd take up steel to destroy him.

"Oh, Mr. Soumeland," I say. "On my honor, I am no swordsman."

It's not really necessary to take it outside for a psychic conflict. We're not going to be at risk of injuring bystanders, we do not need any more space than we need to breathe. He's wide open and ready for me to go in and have at his mental furniture, and if there is a way to unhappen this disappointing clash, it is a mystery to me. I bow right back when he bends toward me. We have attracted attention. There is a hush falling over the nearer dancers and those who are resting from their own exertions. People are looking our way, watching us over their drinks, abandoning their conversations. I don't know why. There will be nothing to see.

I straighten up and I charge.

Mr. Soumeland's mind is a crash of tangles and tripwires. The trick is not to unpick them. They would take so long to fathom to the point of solving the maze that we'd be bodily removed from the premises before I got more than halfway through. Mental knots are more like drawings of knots than like anything you'll find in a ship's rigging or a knitting basket. There is no particular obligation for all of their pieces to exist on a continuous basis, for their threads not to go straight through one another, for any of it to be limited to three dimensions instead of twisting itself through time and forgetfulness and contradiction and north-by-sideways as much as it pleases. Mr. Soumeland is advantaged as I am not in maneuvering here, not

because he can undo his own knots any faster, but because he can push them aside easily. That is his own noodle-dish of feelings about his mother, and I cannot decide it is irrelevant and slip through it intact, but he can. He can burrow through the holes to hide, to ambush, to launch attacks from arrow-slits that from my own angle cannot admit even a drop of imaginary water.

I, though, can shapechange.

Not literally, of course, but in the same way that I can spill out of the boundaries of my skull to bounce against the forms of other minds in the ballroom, I can flow, not through the right path but into every nook and cranny. I can become the air his thoughts breathe. I know how to send pulses through the blank space of thoughts he doesn't think, sensations he doesn't process, data he doesn't remember, and feel the negative space, and occupy it.

A duel is not a dignified thing. It is possible, of course, to take a beautiful portrait of two gentlemen standing off in solemn poses, or to sketch out a moment of the action itself that looks impressive. I am given to understand that some romantic young ladies can even find loveliness in a man clutching his wounded side, if they're the type for that. But the actual smack of violence against flesh, or in this case against gray matter, is neither elegant nor polite. It is preferable only to dishonor.

I insinuate myself into the empty spaces of Mr. Soumeland and thrash wildly.

This has to be done fast. I am in a sense "inside" his mind, and that means that he is "around" me. I can expand, and he can squeeze: the question is whether I explode faster than he bites. It's of course more complicated than this. We are not arm-wrestling. It's an elaborate choreography of pushing and snarling and shoring up weaknesses that would otherwise collapse or burst. But it's quick,

and the basic principle is not unlike trying to hold an alligator's mouth shut.

I am the alligator. I slip out from his grip and get my fangs into him and it's over.

Mr. Soumeland staggers, drops to one knee, falls into the arms of somebody's mother.

A psychic duel normally does broad and indiscriminate damage. It has some things in common with a night of blackout drinking, some things in common with aging a year or thirty and finding that your skills are rusty and your memories dim. Most of it is recoverable. Most of the severed threads will grow back together, or prove to have redundancies, if he gives himself a good few weeks of rest and calm. At least, this is true of the threads I was not expressly aiming for.

The trouble with duels performed with blades or bullets is that they do not, as a matter of impolite nonfiction, solve anything. Whatever the question was, the duel provides a scaffold for forgiveness and forgetfulness. It is "settled". It barely even matters who won; it is not as though the loser is somehow obliged, being pinked with a rapier, to change his mind.

Not so when the duel's landscape is the mind.

I have some practice in this butchery, and Mr. Soumeland is not going to find it so easy in his future social engagements to spit barbs at fellow guests minding their own business.

As he is helped to his feet by some of his friends I attend to my own little headache. A gunshot may go wide, or be aimed deliberately at the sky, but no one leaves a psychic duel unscathed. I rub my temples, drain my glass of water and pass it to the nearest servant, and take the man's napkin from his apron pocket to wipe the sweat

off my forehead. I will be fine in the morning, but I have no further appetite for dancing. Poor Auntie, two men short of an even count.

I don't retain much of the process of making my excuses and hailing a carriage to take me back to my apartments on Prince's Row. I achieve principally by subconscious habit my aim of being alone, at home, wearing many layers fewer than would be called for at the ball, lounging on my couch with a wet cloth on my forehead. I do not track time with much care. My attempts at napping will be rather troubled if I am lifting my head to look at the clock whenever I can't be confident of the hour. I expect warning enough in my hunger, well in advance of when I will need to dress for my dinner engagement with Nirecel.

Ah, damn, she's sure to notice that not all is well with me and scold me for dueling again. I could not begin to explain what she imagines remains as an option when someone is truly incorrigible. I know women do not duel, but I expect this must be down to some limitations on the sorts of insults they offer to one another, or to their menfolk championing them. Nirecel at times attempts to describe a future in which everyone is like this, except with no champions who do their fighting for them and without any detail on how knaves without respect for the rules of engagement would be brought into line.

After I've dozed off and been woken by my rumbling belly, displeased with how little of the main course I took, my head feels much better. Not completely, but it's now a cross between an ordinary tension headache and having just woken up from a nightmare I didn't have. I make myself quite presentable for dinner, consult the clock, and, keeping firmly to the shade, walk six blocks to the restaurant Nirecel and I favor.

It's a charming bistro with Chunabin breads and sauces and, today, a special on roasted goose. They don't do nearly as well with desserts, but Nirecel has no sweet tooth anyway. The host

recognizes me and seats me at the usual table, beside the back window that looks out onto the river. I watch the boats and wait for Nirecel to arrive with her usual chaperone, her grandmother, who doesn't like me at all and still prefers me to anyone else who's ever crossed Nirecel's path.

They run a touch late, likely an attack of rheumatism on my grandmother-in-law-to-be's ankles - I have to watch myself around her, it's a genuinely nasty case and I don't like to borrow it. But before the waitstaff can begin to wonder if I've been stood up there they are. I get up and bow to the grandmother, kiss Nirecel's lovely hand, pull out their chairs and sit when they've sat.

The shape of Nirecel's mind is tremendously comfortable. I spill out over to her because I like the contact rather than because I dislike being inside myself; there's a beautiful smoothness to her, a bubbly round quality, like chimes or cranberries. Truth be told, an unkind person could call her face plain, but I was well over that hesitation some five minutes into our first acquaintance. If she is plain then she is plain like vanilla. I would import her all the way from the Unconquered Isles.

Nirecel herself is not ungifted in the psychic arts. She has no formal training, as that is generally reserved for the military, but if they ever did start enlisting women psychics she'd accumulate promotions very quickly. She's picked it up hanging around me. The way I lean on her mind is not totally unlike the initial lessons in emitting pulses and feeling out the psychic territory around oneself. By now she's able to gently push back, like a returned embrace. And her grandmother need be none the wiser.

Though she might have a guess, since when we've both sat down we remain in total silence with our eyes closed until a grandmotherly hum alerts us to the waiter standing by for our order.

When we've sent him off for a platter of goose and sundries, I take Nirecel's hand across the table; we entwine our fingers beside the candle that flickers between us. "How have you been?" I ask her.

"I thought I might have caught cold after I got caught in the storm yesterday with the boys," her nephews, "but mercifully seem unscathed - and you? You look run down."

I do not look run down. She's noticed the strain in my mind. It's more like feeling where a bit of fabric is threadbare than like spotting the shadows under someone's eyes. "I'm afraid I cannot understand my aunt's choices of guests sometimes," I tell her, shaking my head. "I -"

"Aust," she says, pulling back her hand from mine. "Not again!"

"He suggested that my uniform was a forgery! Thirty people could have overheard him, love." I almost reach for her hand again but suspect she wouldn't appreciate it.

"You could have told him to ask your aunt - or to look up your service record - you could have pretended you couldn't hear him at all -"

"Nirecel -"

"You could have asked her to escort him out of the ball. You could have -"

"I have my honor, Nirecel!" I exclaim, though I do my best to keep my voice low and level.

"If your honor requires you to put yourself in harm's way -"

"I am also an Augur serving at Her Majesty's pleasure, which is no safer, I assure you."

"I think defending our shores is more honorable than defending your dignity by shredding some other fellow's thoughts into a fine paste, even if both require a willingness to put your own health on the line. For mercy's sake, Aust, you don't take up a pistol because that's forbidden by your commanding officer and don't see this as a fault in your honor, do you? Tell them I forbid you to duel at all."

"That is not quite the same thing."

"And why shouldn't they be?"

"My love," I say, "we have something of an audience, just now."

She looks around, beginner's psychic pulse flaring out to confirm that we've begun to attract notice from neighboring tables, and pouts - or perhaps it is more of an outright scowl, endearing though I find her every expression. "This is not over."

"Please, let's just enjoy our meal." The waiter is coming back. The goose smells divine. I give Nirecel the lion's share of the potatoes as a peace offering, knowing she loves them. The grandmother, who has been glowering at me, permits a distraction from her vigil of disapproval when I slice her the choicest piece of meat.

I walk Nirecel and her grandmother home after we have eaten our quiet meal. Nirecel's pearlescent thoughts are roiling very concerningly. "Love," I say.

"Do you," she says. "Love me, I mean. Do you really."

"Of course - how can you imagine otherwise? Have I shown myself inconstant in any way - do you want your proposal right now in the middle of this street, Nirecel, I haven't the ring yet but if you have any doubt of me -"

"If you love me," she says, "you will swear to me, on your honor, no more duels."

I miss a step. She continues forward and I lose hold of her lovely cool hand. She turns on her toe, folds her arms.

"Nirecel."

"No, Aust, I do not fear that you have been taking advantage of debutantes or getting little bastards on every scullery in Southside. I do not suspect that you are sick to death of me and drowning the misery in drink and cards while gamely soldiering on through the courtship for the sake of appearances. I fear what I said. I will have your promise, Aust, or you will have your freedom, which I know full well is not what you would have of me."

"Nirecel, please - let's get your poor grandmother home, her ankles -"

"Oh, no, go right ahead," says the traitorous grandmother. "A little rest is just the thing in this weather."

"It isn't a complicated question, Aust," says Nirecel. Smooth cold thoughts all point in the same direction. She isn't going to budge.

"I cannot be anything but a gentleman," I whisper. "There is no Aust Harwisht without his honor."

"Yes. With your promise I could trust you."

"But I cannot - I cannot allow every rascalion with a sharp wit go unanswered, even if they *wouldn't* let it be known across the entire Empire that I had made myself defenseless - you are no Senior Clarivoyant who speaks as though with the Queen's voice to command me to guard my own hide, Nirecel. We aren't even wed -"

"Would you promise, if we were?" she asks, frosty.

"What would you have me do?" I cry.

"Just what I said. Your promise, on your honor. Host all your own parties if you like and be selective as fine mesh, if it is so important to avoid slights. Become a hermit with me and we'll have a dozen children to keep us company. Live in the countryside all year round where you can socialize with tradesmen and feel no need to answer their unlettered remarks. In so many things you are so bright, Aust, can you apply none of it here? You're flailing like a garter snake in a child's apron."

I'm holding completely still but she's pressed thought to thought against me, glass-smooth, pillow-plush, and, yes, she can probably feel me casting about for some way to reconcile with her demands. Abandon society and the company of worthwhile peers just to filter out the handful of scoundrels? Endure those scoundrels in silence, like a child or a donkey, even as they sense weakness and crowd like vultures around my shambling remnants?

I would import her from the Unconquered Isles. It takes a ship four months to sail there and another four to come home again. It would cost a fair sum.

A broken reputation, though. That I cannot purchase, cannot have brought to me wrapped in brown paper in the belly of a cargo vessel, cannot defend from piracy and larceny without taking up my own weapon.

"Nirecel," I say again.

"I see," she says, cool. "I won't make you say it aloud. I wish you a swift recovery on this and all future occasions." She pivots away, draws level with her grandmother, and continues away without my company.

I stand there dumb as a rock until I must stand aside to let a carriage by, and then I meander home by gaslight as the streetlamps come on.

A month later the Summer is winding down. Nirecel has not relented; her answers to my letters are brief and sometimes memorized by the courier rather than committed to paper in her own hand. I have cancelled as many of my plans as I have been able to without needing to explain myself. Instead of concerts and card games and theater tickets and dances and the regatta, I have the walls of my apartment. I have the books that I have already read because I can concentrate on nothing new. I have delegated one of my sisters, Claine, to tell the rest of the family of my loss; it is their business, but I cannot bear it.

I might have gone back to the countryside entirely except that the trip takes nearly a week each way. It's really only worth the travel if one is staying for the whole of the Summer or some comparable length of time. And I will not be at liberty much longer. My leave will come to an end and I can rejoin my unit and return to the Westlands where there are problems that can be solved with force of will and keen thoughts. I can hope to be distracted, though it's possible that even combat will do nothing to relieve my misery, just as useless as a round of betting on dice with seashells (forbidden to use coinage, as a financially ruined officer is nearly as difficult to get use of as one full of steel or lead).

Still, it is not my choice, and there is some chilly comfort in that, that Her Majesty continues to find me of value without caring a whit about my heartbreak. Comforting, that my comrades in arms will not likely bestir themselves to suggest that my Nirecel was hardly the prettiest girl an Augur could hope to pull. We will be at sea and then we will be in a fortified position and none of them will have a sister on hand to recommend I meet at some forthcoming garden party, some dreadful sister scarcely out of the nursery with thoughts like bales of straw. (I was not able to excuse myself from the garden party without giving rather grievous offense. I barely excused myself from the sister.)

The day before I must report for duty, I send my own sister Claine - she is the only one in town for the Summer this year, the others respectively too poorly and too pregnant - to appeal to Nirecel for me, hoping for some token or a kiss farewell or at least an assurance that she hasn't taken up with another fellow. ("Nonsense," Claine said, "it was her great good luck that *you* could look past -" but then she shushed.) Claine returns empty-handed. "She wouldn't even speak to me," she reports. "I was turned away by the footman. You can try again next Summer, Aust, it'll be all right."

It shall never be all right. There's no one like her in all the world, not even if I search the Unconquered Isles from cape to cape and comb the Empire entire.

But I am called to serve, and I am there, in my uniform with my trunk neatly packed, when it is time to muster.

I am privileged with a private berth in the good ship *Insight*, one of several in a small convoy headed for the fortresses in the Westlands to bring supplies and letters and reinforcements. Then the ships will turn around and bring back the various prizes our men have taken there, and with them our fellows who are due to take leave. The Westlands are four weeks traveling west, a little longer returning home. A substantial journey, but a routine one. I will be able to send letters without too much delay, if ever I take it into my head that Nirecel won't forward them to my sister, unopened and unread.

There are some poor attempts on board the ship to entertain. A couple of the sailors have tolerable voices and there are three complete packs of cards in circulation and one incomplete one that is still, I am repeatedly told, suitable for some specific games. A bunch of fellows sit together on the deck to mend their clothes and work on their quilts and scrimshaw. There is frequent demand for literate assistance with letter-writing, and into this duty I am occasionally pressed.

Mostly, embarrassing though it is to confess, I mope.

There are three other psychics in my unit, along with dozens of riflemen and sappers and suchlike. Psychics don't cluster together too much - for one thing so few men show any aptitude for it, and for another most of what we do is at least as effective solo as in a team. All four of us trying to do anything together would be a bit like a table trying to stand up on legs of four different heights, one of which is made of cheese, another of which is thin enough to slice straight through the floor, a third which only exists during banking hours. This might keep your table off the ground, most of the time, after a fashion. It would still be more sensible to arrange four separate pedestals instead.

But we do know each other, and while I happen to be the strongest of the bunch that only means that they can't tell what I'm echoing my thoughts off, who I'm experiencing to avoid experiencing myself; it is certainly as plain to them as the nose on my face that I'm upset. One makes an abortive attempt while we're clearing the harbor to cheer me up, with an anecdote about his father's glory days, and when he finds me able to collect only a modicum of outward politeness and no genuine levity he leaves off and tells the other two. I spend the rest of that day and most of the next weeks as well simply staring at the clouds, or the waves, or partaking of vicarious sleep with whoever is on the schedule opposite my own and spends the day dreaming in his hammock. Sometimes that's all the sleep I get, and I spend the night surveying the stars and wishing I were unconscious or at least duty-bound to be busy.

By the end of the journey I have written eight letters to Nirecel, some of them quite long. I do not expect it to behoove me to send them. She has made up her mind. I flatter myself to think that she might miss me, and if I could alter her choices by playing on her feelings I might not be above it, but I don't expect her to be changeable. If I cannot see my way to abolishing the practice of dueling in my life she cannot see her way to our reconciliation. So all

the letters might do is pointlessly grieve her, and I love her still and would not see this done if it could achieve nothing.

I ultimately bundle the letters up and send them to my sister with instructions that Nirecel may have them if she should ask for them, particularly if there should be news of my death. Perhaps if I fall in battle she will prefer to remember me as her beloved and not as her spurned, and might like to have the records of my affection.

It's not too common for psychics to fall in battle, fortunately - we can sense the enemy at a better distance than most riflemen can manage, if we're on alert, and one of us always is when there's any reason to suspect hostility. Other psychics may take us out of commission for a while. One of the gentlemen on the *Insight* with me had to learn all over again how to walk and it is to his credit that he did not resign on a permanent basis but came right back once he could march with the rest of us. But this is no special risk to psychics, at least - if anything we're less likely to forget the accustomed use of feet than a mentally undefended soldier is. We're there specifically to make those soldiers less undefended, less surprised by bandit camps and guerilla hideaways, a little more easily patched up if some fellow should take the metaphorical torch to their minds. And of course we're invaluable for interrogations, which crop up only rarely, and for taking out careless members of the other force by making *them* forget how to walk. It's at least no crueller a way to remove someone from the battlefield than a bayonet through the chest.

In my state as the *Insight* sails into the bay where we'll disembark into the Westland fortifications I am not immune to the idea that perhaps psychics could stand to fall in battle a bit more. Maybe I will be one of those men clutching a wounded side and Nirecel will turn out to be the sort of woman who likes to fuss over such men and she will apologize for ever imagining that a little scuffling of my thoughts against a challenger's should have kept her from my side. I will collect the ring from the jeweler and limp to our wedding,

recovering my vigor at the sight of my beloved in her finery in plenty of time to fall into bed with her... This fantasy runs aground on the fact that most possible wounds would either kill me before I could be delivered ashore at home or be quite past the point of needing tender nursing by the time I completed the journey. Also self-recrimination that I never did cancel the request at the jeweler's. I may be holding out hope that Nirecel will with time think better of her refusing me but the jeweler's hope is more expensive.

The other psychics are shooting me odd looks. I know they're not reading me very deeply, but of course they can notice the rough craquelure in my mental surface and by now it's no secret from anyone aboard the ship that I'm a jilted man. They can do the sum.

We report to the command. We're assigned to our lodgings in the fort. Almost at once I am assigned to escort a supply mission to the men entrenched in a disputed position some miles inland. There's an attempt underway to build a mine there, and the objections to it have been sporadic but significant enough that a garrison is maintained at the site, and both the builders and the garrison require deliveries.

I do not receive a mount. My range is sufficient to cover the whole wagon train end to end with a little added slack for difficult terrain where we may be more spread out; I will walk near the middle rather than riding to and fro. I don't relish the prospect but would certainly be embarrassed beyond words if anyone should offer me a seat in his wagon.

It's a brisk day, as the autumn is finally biting into the climate and the Westlands get a chilly breeze off the ocean most of the time. The trail to the mine, deprived of its plant cover by repeated trips like this one, is dusty enough to make everyone sneeze and to coat an unwary tongue with fine yellow grit. The surrounding shrubbery that the head of the line prunes out of our way with rough slashes smells angrily green, oozing from the cut stems, and we are

throughout shouted at by the queer local tree-rodents and colorful birds. I do not find it a pleasant walk. I drift into the heads of my compatriots. This is not a lack of military discipline, of course; I am there specifically in case the natives should choose to assault us, most especially with psychics of their own. Westlander psychics are trained very differently, or perhaps "trained" is not even the right word; but the underlying principles are the same, and if one is sniffing around the minds of these porters and the rest of the escort it is my duty to beat them back.

All appears clear. The minds in our line are moving unimpeded. Some are bored, some are too dull to be bored, and some are too lively in their observation of the nature around us to be bored. These last are of course the most pleasant; I ride pillion on their amateur naturalism to get away from my aching feet, unaccustomed after the moping and the sea voyage to all this tromping on the hard ground.

At the mining site I stand vigil over the process of unloading and disbursing the parcels of food and miscellany that we came here to hand over. The miners are a malcontent lot - some of them were brought here as part of a labor sentence for some sort of mischief, and some of them look like they could have been impressed from the local population, though I don't actually get close enough to check their accents or get a closer look at their features. It's not a comfortable atmosphere to spread myself out over, though. Resentment and yearning to be anywhere else bounces into me from dozens of points, and I can't even wedge myself back into my own skull to avoid it because I am there specifically to monitor them. My commanding officer would have my head if I let someone knock the lot of them unconscious and smuggle away some of the black powder they'll be using to blow holes in the ground, or even a carton of tinned fish. The would-be thieves must at least wait until it's stored safely and they'd have more of a job getting ahold of any.

There's a ripple in the thoughts before me.

Maybe they all saw something a little startling? A chipmunk running boldly across their line of sight might do it, but -

I push out a bit farther. Nothing, nothing -

Another ripple. There wasn't a chipmunk. Do they smell something, is there bad mine air seeping out? Is -

"Secure the powder!" I cry, running toward the wagons to draw attention. "Somebody's here! There's a psychic, a strong -"

The abyssal whale, a colossal mind moving through the dozens of men as easily as my hand might brush through a spiderweb, seizes me by the consciousness and pinches it like they're extinguishing a candle.

I come round faster than the other men, and immediately still my mind and my body alike to render this nonobvious. I flex my thoughts in the half-random twitches of a dream, hoping to conceal my actual attention in the shadows of these quivers. Close scrutiny could reveal me, but the other psychic, while considerably more formidable than I am, cannot have infinite attention for everyone here in detail and may not even know that I'm a psychic. An ordinary man could have noticed the nudges and there is always some variance in how long it takes a fellow to come round from being snuffed down like that.

I don't dare open my eyes, but I can hear dragging sounds and footfalls and the chatter of natives in their pitchy singsong tongue. And while I remain totally still, casting my mind at intervals to thoughts of battle and drowning and adventure on dragonback as though I'm dreaming yet, I seep out to sense their minds.

Almost all of the natives present feel to me like they have some psychic ability - not on the level of even my lowest ranked colleague, more like Nirecel's casual familiarity. I have to drift very carefully (I

imagine returning to boarding school in the nude) out from my own ears and across the landscape, looking for an opening. (I contemplate Nirecel's lovely smile as though it were mine to see again and then cut myself off with a recollection of a nightmare I once had about all my teeth falling out before anyone might be treated to imaginings they ought not entertain). But it's only the strong one that I'm in serious danger of alerting - the others won't spot me as long as I keep doing things like thinking as hard as possible about being lost in an endless number of twisted copies of my grandparents' manor.

I spot him. - If it's a him? There's an ambiguous texture, but I daren't look too closely. As far as I can tell he hasn't yet detected that I'm awake. He may be focusing on something else. It's a pleasant enough day, with a brisk breeze, nothing to tempt someone out of their borders. Perhaps he's as comfortable as can be and doesn't think much of the Empire's psychics and isn't on guard.

Or he's just lurking beneath the edges of my ability to detect, watching me for a wrong move, and then he'll kill me.

Eh. What have I to go on for if I can't even serve Queen and country. (I imagine, dreamily, being presented a medal by Her Majesty before a grateful populace, and Nirecel breaking forth from the crowd, running toward me to fling her arms against me and her enamored mind against mine - I have an excellent reason to be dwelling on this, I must seem asleep -)

At any rate I've tracked the man down. He's over the rise from me; I couldn't see him from here even if I opened my eyes and twisted around, which would attract the attention of lots more of these fellows besides. Keeping my probes gentle and indistinct, like psychic snores - Nirecel's prone to those, I have had the privilege of experiencing her nodding off on my shoulder in a carriage once or twice - I scout. The psychic is stationary. Awake, but not particularly alert - so far as I can tell. (I pretend to dream about rabbits in my

apartment, fancy rabbits in a hundred colors, appearing in droves every time I open a cupboard or closet, replacing my pillows, tripping me whenever I advance a step, always in my chair when I intend to sit down.)

From my position the only way to win the confrontation is to do it instantly, before it starts, before he knows there is any resistance about. I cannot get into all the nooks and crannies of his mind and puff up like a pudding in there, hoping to break the lacings and cinches on my way out. He'll crush me like an ant. Not even an ant; they have a sort of crispy armor to them and this fellow is a giant to my dwarf. Like a spit-bubble beneath his shoe, I'd crumple.

No, instead, I have two possible approaches. (I imagine myself ice-skating on a mirror until it shatters and I plunge into the darkness beneath, surrounded by tumbling shards.) If something very tiny wants to kill a man, it can go about it by poison: the spider, the snake, the jellyfish. Or, it can deal its tiny blow, and sometimes it will be lucky: the man with a fly in his eye may fall from his horse, someone bitten by a mouse might succumb later to infection, a cat's claw could strike a hemophiliac. (I imagine all my sisters transforming into swans and assailing me with their beaks insisting that I break the spell by brewing a curative potion.)

I do not have the time or the faith in my good fortune to rely on the second method. I must become poisonous. And I must finesse it quickly, because I can feel the flock of minds around me collecting themselves in a fashion that suggests, in conjunction with the sounds reaching my ears, that they are preparing to go with their explosive prizes, no doubt to blow up some of my countrymen and the installations we need to do our work here.

I contemplate my plan of attack with one of my fictive dreams. I picture myself walking down a hallway, tiles and walls and doors coming into existence as I approach them. It winds left, then right. I run into dead ends. I change the color of the hallway in my mind's

eye capriciously, I add queer background noises that do not belong in hallways from birdsong to the roar of the tide, I imagine the whole thing to smell of apples - but the center of my attention is on which way the hallway is leading.

I am twisting and turning and tumbling and teleporting through this imaginary corridor and it is mapped to the shape of the other psychic's mind. I cannot spread out everywhere. I must sting in one well chosen place and seem on my journey there to be going by accident. So it must look like a dream. I turn the tile to carpet and the doors to windows. When I run into a real obstacle, I twist my hall that little bit farther, and I flood it and hike it upstream. When I reach a dead end I hang three lefts and a right and dream-logic the hallway into something suitably distinct so it won't look repetitive if I come under scrutiny.

The hallway is a hiking trail. I have turned myself into a bloodhound in case that helps. I am followed by a six-piece brass band. I cannot be inconspicuous; I must instead be madly harmless. Left, right, a sharp slope down, and I have reached the useless vestibule of the sense of smell. I turn around and proceed on snowshoes. There must be something I can do here more useful than knocking out the man's nose! I am running out of ideas! I become a spelunker in a cave, climbing as though with gecko-feet and floating in that slow heavy dreamy way from stalactite to stalagmite, searching and searching -

There.

I turn my staged dream into one about swimming with blind cave fish in an underground pool and circle, thoughtful. I am running out of time but haste will quite fox all my efforts. I have found the other psychic's ability to distinguish people from one another. If I can but strike true here, turn this pond into a powder keg like those they're looting and blow it up, the psychic won't be able to tell his men from mine. Then, if he tries to strike me, he'll be just as likely to hit

anyone else. He is stronger than I am, but not to the point of standing a chance if his blows virtually all land wild and he pulls them for fear of harming a friend. It is not the most ideal target I could have wound my way to, but I am not at liberty to sniff around for anything better still; they seem to have collected what they're here for and begun to move out, and if he leaves my range and I have to chase him, my identity will be obvious. This one will do.

I collapse the dream and bear down in the same mental movement, drilling and cleaving apart everything in reach from my one little vantage point, and then I bail out.

Or, I begin to bail out.

No one escapes psychic combat unscathed. A few things buffet me here and there on my way home to my own brain. He may not know which person I am, but I'm in his head and have done something to it he wasn't expecting; it's no great puzzle to bludgeon my retreating mind even if he won't be able to chase me when I've made good my retreat.

Between having been knocked out earlier, and the soporific lull of having remained in the exact same physical position on the ground for so long, and the thwack of the great psychic's retaliatory blows, I lose consciousness again amid a great shout of confusion from the thieves.

I come to in a sitting position, in one of the wagons, a flask of water held to my lips. It is very welcome, though I drink it only clumsily. My head hurts and it is referring this pain to every other part of my body, but I know the stomachache at least to be a fake, and swallow through my sore throat over my phantom discomforts' objections.

"Augur? Are you with me?" says one of the enlisted. My ears resent the sound.

"Yes," I croak, once the water is safely drunk.

"We've run them off. Once they started hollering most of us woke up. What did you *do* to their psychic?"

I want this person to shut up. I want to sleep for a week. I want Nirecel to be the one offering me water instead. "Get us home again and I will explain in my report," I mumble. I take another drink. I tip over in the wagon to rest my head on some folded-up tarp and make no objection to being transported back from the mine, now with its powder locked up well and less appetizing to steal. I do not quite drift off. The wagon is not comfortable nor its action particularly smooth. But I rest, and try to convince the homunculus in my mind that it has not torn all its fingernails off down to the quick nor scraped half the skin off its legs, self-soothing the frantic random pains till all that remains is the pounding ache in my head.

I muster the energy, back at the fort, to give my account of the events. We have taken a couple of casualties, no one of exceptional value but funerals to arrange all the same. I am prescribed two days' complete bedrest, which does not sound like nearly enough but would be what I would order for a psychic under my auspices who had experienced a comparable issue. I will be much improved by then and ready for constitutionals around the premises, perhaps even light duty.

I sleep fitfully. My dreams, unlike the imaginary ones I came up with as camouflage, are too indistinct to remember on waking; I am missing some key faculty that would let me understand their content in retrospect and I recall being quite confused during their unfoldings as well. I lie in bed, bored but unable to do anything about it; someone brings me meals at intervals, easy porridges and soups. At one point a camp follower of some description wanders into my room and has to be directed elsewhere. If ever I wanted that sort of attention it wouldn't be while I was bedridden.

After my two days of rest I am feeling much better. The other psychics have been sufficient to cover operations, but I'm assigned a

patrol to relieve them somewhat, and the walk helps me loosen myself from my stiff self-pity. But for some reason quite opaque to me, everyone I speak to soon begins to act very oddly.

There are no strange shapes in their minds. I do check. It seems likely that my confrontation with the enemy has done some more lasting harm. I need to render this information to my commander.

"Don't call me that," the commander says when I make my address.

"I apologize," I say. "I know the fault must lie with me, because I cannot detect any interference in anyone else, but everyone has been responding in that and similar ways to me whenever I speak. I think there is some wound in my mind causing my words to come out incorrectly and am only grateful that I can make myself understood as well as it seems I still can." The injury could easily have prevented me from speaking at all, or from breathing.

"That's clear," sighs the commander. "I'll have the Haruspex see if there's anything to be done directly, and failing that you are to return to leave in the hopes that you may recover before someone ignorant of your condition takes a stray word amiss and you wind up trying to duel someone."

"Duel someone!" I say. "I would never dream of it!"

"Wouldn't you?"

"Of course not," I reply. "It would be behavior completely unbecoming a gentlewoman."

The Haruspex is quite unable to solve my problem, and she - excuse me, I'm told otherwise and am under orders to take the lady's word for it - he pronounced me incurable after some hours of poking and prodding. For a time I'm still assigned my normal duties. My psychic abilities are intact, and after all, what cannot be solved with surgery

may yet mend with time. I feel it cannot be that debilitating a problem if I can still walk and talk, read and play a competent hand of cards, take care of my personal affairs without assistance, and down an enemy combatant at a hundred paces without noticing anything amiss. But I do manage to keep offending people, little though I mean to do so.

Eventually the Commander decides that she's had enough of my innocent mischief and orders me sent back to the city on the next transport out. I am not discharged entirely, but will instead of further deployments be training novice psychic soldiers at the Academy; I heard some remark about my being a "useful cautionary tale", though, again, I can't see that I'm going to scare some neophyte cadet as long as I can still do everything I ought to be able to and am suffering not a bit. I wish I could fathom what it was that was wrong with me - it must be terrifically amusing at least to a certain sense of humor, because jokes at my expense are constantly flying behind my back even though I can detect them perfectly well without turning around. I have been asked the most peculiar questions about my wardrobe and my inheritance and my marital prospects as though any of those things should be affected. I am an officer and I wear my uniform like any other. Certainly my parents may decide some changes to the disposition of the estate are in order if I am indefinitely impaired, but not before having assessed me for themselves, and they are weeks away. As for my marital prospects...

On my way back home I pace the deck of the ship (it's the *Insight*, again, as it routinely sails this way) and plan my reunion with Nirecel. She had wanted me to stop dueling. I cannot now imagine why I was doing it in the first place! Presumably this is something to do with whatever the enemy psychic knocked aside in her defensive thrashing, either the main complaint or some additional marring. I must have felt I had some excellent rationale at the time, but no matter how I turn the matter about in my head it does not make a speck of sense. At any rate I can now see my way clear to setting

the distasteful practice aside, and if I am missing some reason why others might expect me to partake of any dueling in the future then at least my mysterious infirmity should excuse me.

I shall go straightaway to Nirecel's house. She'll be in the countryside now that the Summer's over, but no matter, I can hire a carriage as soon as I reach land; my teaching duties won't begin until the next term in a month and a half. That should leave me enough time to go to her, ensure that no one else has snapped her up in my absence, and ask for her hand properly. I can stop at the jeweler on my way; the ring should be done by now since I never did post a letter cancelling my order.

The *Insight* comes into harbor on time and releases me into my homeland. It's glorious to be back home and ready to take the plunge with my beloved. We shall be married in the snow and I shall bring her to all the best parties in the next Summer and show her off to everyone as my wife, my wife, my wife. Assuming she will have me.

I collect the ring, stop off at my apartment to put away some things and exchange them for others in my traveling trunk, and proceed at best speed to Nirecel's family home. It is hours away, but not days. With regular changes of horses I arrive in the village surrounding her manor before midnight, though of course I can't call at that hour and instead secure a room at the nearest inn. Were it a few months ago I could have counted on her servants to receive me and tuck me away in a guest room to greet her over breakfast but I am not so sure of my status now as to attempt it.

The inn is no luxurious palace but it serves the purpose and I don't exchange enough words with anyone to alarm them with my invisible injury. In the morning I am off at sunup, too much aflutter in the stomach to contemplate eating at the inn before I fly to my Nirecel.

I can feel that she is at home as soon as I approach the front gate of the garden. I had worried that she might be visiting someone else, on a trip, married already to another and settled in their marital home together, but no, there she is, drifting from room to room up on the second floor. Lovely rainbowy polished-pearl thoughts in a butter-plush mind, and I had thought I'd never again have the privilege to be so near. I forget for a few moments to knock on the door and then have at it with some ferocity.

I am answered by the butler, and she leads me into the parlor and goes to alert Nirecel of my presence. I cannot sit. I pace. I must somehow avoid offending *her*. This is difficult, as tasks go, because all I know is that it has something to do with how I talk. I do not think she is easily ruffled, as a person. Perhaps it has simply been my bad luck to encounter thin-skinned sorts since my clash with the enemy psychic. But this is far too important to trust to these suppositions. I will have to open by begging her forgiveness in advance, and explain that my deficit is such that it is invisible to me, and then... well, it will have to be her own decision in the end if she'll have me with these scars, but it is so terrible to contemplate the possibility that I will once again see the back of her, my love, my only, that the worst day of my life might happen a second time.

I brace myself when I feel her approach.

"Aust," she says, and I sit down abruptly in the nearest chair, my knees knocked out from under me by the relief I feel simply from hearing her voice.

"Nirecel," I answer, clasping my hands before me in supplication. "I must begin by saying that I am wounded, in my mind."

She drops into the chair opposite me. "Wounded! I can't find it -" Her sleek satiny touch is so welcome that it might well have healed all my wounds at once, only then I would probably be able to

discern in retrospect where the strike had landed and what it had done.

"Nor can I," I say. "I do not know what it is. It must be some subtle deep harm, and I do know that the one who dealt it was very powerful. Explanations from persons whom I have offended in my infirmity sound to me as sensical as a babbling drunkard and slip quickly from my memory. All I know is that I continually give those around me reason to complain of my manners. I must beg your indulgence, for I want nothing less than to upset you with some inadvertently mischosen word, but I do not know how to avoid what I cannot understand."

Nirecel's brow furrows and she nods very solemnly.

"I have been told by the expert Haruspex in my unit that the prospects for recovery are slim to none; she was unable to -"

Nirecel's eyebrows have shot up. I look at her apologetically. "I've gone and said whatever it is, haven't I."

"Yes. Ah, go on, I'm not vexed at you about it."

"Thank you. At any rate, I have been deemed unsuitable for active duty, and am reassigned to the Academy. But what brings me here is not that; I know you were never strongly averse to the anticipation of a wife who was often away..." She twitches again. I am seized by a sudden and terrible fear that I have somehow been clobbered about the brain in such a specific way that I have hallucinated our romance entire and we were ever only friends - but then why the ring, commissioned before I shipped out? I force the fear aside and go on. "So that my more permanent residence is not likely to be the deciding thing. Rather, I have the recollection that you wanted my vow to cease dueling. Have I got that right or is it mixed up with my addlement?"

"You have that right," she says, so gently, so softly.

"I cannot now recall why I would not give you that oath then and there. I cannot recall why I ever dueled at all, besides perhaps a juvenile fascination with my own prowess. It is a terribly unsuitable pastime. I shall now have no trouble giving it up for you. I know you would not have asked it of me in the first place if there were some obvious fine reason I should be a duelist."

"You... had your reasons," she allows. Her thoughts slide over one another like the voices in a polyphonic choir. "I did not think they sufficed. But, Aust, if you should one day recover your absent faculty, healed by an expert or only time, you may regret giving me your promise. You may regard it as a crippling lack. I could live without you. I do not know that I could bear it, if you began to resent me for taking advantage of your present state. For abusing your frailty to secure a promise from you that you did not wish to give when you were whole."

"Whole!" I say. "My darling, my Nirecel, these past months parted from you have been a wasteland of loneliness. I thought of scarcely nothing else but you. I was not whole, and if that monstrously powerful Westlander psychic has taken my career and even my ability to be polite, I will not be the wholer for also lacking you. My memory is no more intact than my etiquette, but I can recall the day you walked away. It was no easy decision even then, my love, my *love* -"

She reaches forward and takes my hand in hers. My breath catches in my throat.

"So," I continue in a whisper. "If my wound is not itself repulsive to you, dear Nirecel, I have come to offer you my promise that I shall never again partake of a duel, and - I ask to be your bride." I produce from my pocket the ring, an unconventional arrangement of cabochons I chose to resemble the serene and glossy timbre of her mind. I drop to my knee before her and offer it up.

"Aust," she murmurs. "Aust, my dear, of course." And she proffers her finger for the ornament, where it fits perfectly. I kiss her gorgeous knuckles, overjoyed.

Then she says, "You will still have to wear a suit to the wedding."

I blink at her. "Of course, what else would I wear?"

"I only wished to be sure." My fiancée strokes my hair from my forehead with her unringed hand, and tugs me up to kiss me.

Servitude

"My lord," said Paxos, "if you don't wish to expend your valuable time on these miserable little insects, you can send me in your stead. You know I will serve you to the utmost of my ability into eternity, even in this."

"No, no," sighed Kolex, waving a hand, "that's fine, Paxos, I don't think it would set the right tone for you to unveil the sign on the new elementary school, you can stay home."

"As you wish, my lord." Paxos bowed, very deep; he no longer wore the glistening armor he'd once put on every day, but he still kept his blond mane at shoulder length, still spent hours every morning keeping in perfect physical condition and sword-readiness. The very picture of the hero apart from the blank blue of his eyes, neither sclera nor pupil.

"Yes, yes. Go do -" Kolex paused; it was risky to tell Paxos to do "something". "Polish the armory display." Again.

"My lord," replied Paxos from the low point of his bow, and he backed out of the room to obey.

This sort of thing was why Kolex managed most of his personnel by text chat these days. When Paxos was gone, Kolex called a car to take him to the school. Paxos got a lot of practice polishing the things in the museum wing and there were probably only a couple of hours to be had before he was done.

Kolex pulled down the cloth that covered the sign for Twelve Poplars Elementary and folded it up solemnly while the small audience politely clapped. Camera flashes went off, and the children's choir

standing on the steps leading up to the school entrance began to warble. Kolex applauded when they were done and then followed the school board into the new building, where they pointed out to him the alchemy lab and the computer room and the home economics kitchen and the library. It seemed like a nice school. Suitable for turning out little well-rounded future doctors and wizards and chefs.

He excused himself rather than accept an inaugural meal at the school cafeteria; surely they'd had enough photo ops for the local papers by now. The chauffeur was waiting around the block for him. Kolex walked it rather than call for the car to turn the corner, since it was a nice day.

"You're harder to recognize without the crown," said a familiar woman's voice.

Kolex looked over his shoulder. "Nkati," he said wearily.

"Going incognito?" she asked.

"I'm wearing a ceremonial cape and a few pounds of jewelry, you tell me," Kolex replied flatly. "The crown's in the museum these days. It gave me a headache. What do you want, Nkati?"

"Paxos," she said. Predictable. It was always what she wanted. "I want Paxos back."

"Well, I'd invite you to stuff him in a sack and cart him home with you but I'm pretty sure if the Prince of Kolxa's retainer slays half of the court of the Elect of Risingsun on his way out, we have a diplomatic incident," said Kolex. "I hate diplomatic incidents."

"I have a new thing to try," Nkati pressed. "My alchemists cooked it up."

"Oh, well, in that case, right this way," said Kalex, rolling his eyes, "come on over, we'll dump him in a vat of whatever you brought and see if it puts him right." This would also cause a diplomatic incident, since Paxos was technically king of Safrandica, ruled in trust for him by a parliament that had gotten pretty used to being in charge, but Kalex would take it.

Nkati made an irritated noise but followed Kalex to the car and got in. The driver was not paid to ask questions. The ride was silent.

She started talking again when they disembarked at the palace side entrance. "I can never decide if it's adding insult to injury that you don't even appreciate him or if that would be worse."

"Well, personally I think it would be worse, or I might do it," said Kalex. "Plus imagine if someone thought it was neat and decided to dig up the ritual. They, too, could have a very awkward next few centuries of realizing that the rest of eternity continues to be just as long."

"I hate you," said Nkati.

"I have lost the zest for life that gave me energy to spare on hating you," Kalex replied. "He should still be in the armory, do you remember where that is?"

"I am not going to approach him without you right there to call him off if he decides that this time the best way to serve you is to try to decapitate me," snapped Nkati.

"Fine, fine." Kalex accompanied her to the armory, where Paxos was scrubbing the plaque that explained the historical significance of the guillotine in the diorama behind it. There was less call for the armory to be arranged for defensive readiness, these days, so it now doubled as a museum, and the curator was forever after Kalex to come up with something else for Paxos to do, since constant polishing wasn't actually good for the exhibits.

"My lord," said Paxos, when Kolex and Nkati came in. "Verminous foe," he added to Nkati, narrowing his blue, blue eyes.

"Paxos," said Nkati.

"She's my guest, Paxos," sighed Kolex.

"My lord," repeated Paxos, still squinting venomously at Nkati but making no aggressive moves.

"Was that," Nkati said, gesturing at Paxos, looking disgustedly at Kolex, "really necessary?"

"What specifically?" Kolex said, rolling his eyes as he beckoned Paxos to follow them to the alchemy workroom where Nkati would presumably want to make her attempt. "I could have gone with 'your imperial majesty', it'd be charmingly anachronistic by now, but in that, if nothing else, I showed foresight."

"The 'verminous foe', part," said Nkati. "You could have had him thinking of me as tragically misguided, one inspirational speech away from defecting and joining him in commanding your undead legions."

"Honestly, I don't remember," Kolex said. He pushed the door open at the end of the hall, preceded the others down the stairs. "I didn't *program* him, you know, it's possible he just picked it up from my subconscious or something."

"If you'd programmed him maybe you'd be able to reprogram him."

"And I would have done it after, oh, thirty years, tops, and then everyone would have assumed he was a sleeper agent and he'd be assassinated by his own parliament the next time he backed an unpopular reform." Kolex shook his head. "What are you looking for, an apology? I've apologized. *I can't fix him*."

"Well," Nkati muttered as they reached the alchemy lab, "hopefully this can."

She'd brought the reagents with her, and only needed a few minutes and a borrowed beaker to assemble them into the active potion while Kolex and Paxos waited.

"My lord?" Paxos inquired in a low voice, while Nkati stirred.

"What is it?"

"May I ask the purpose of this brewing?"

"- same thing Nkati's always darkening my door for. Putting you back to normal. How you were. So you can go - home, and do whatever it is you'd like to be doing besides hanging around me all the time."

Paxos inclined his head and didn't ask any followup questions.

Nkati tested the clear, hissing potion with a strip of reactive paper, checked it against a color index, pronounced it correct. "Tell him to let me administer it," she told Kolex. "Otherwise I wouldn't be surprised if he dashed it to the floor and then I'd have to make another trip."

"Take it," repeated Kolex, tiredly closing his eyes. "Let her give you the potion, go on vacation with Nkati or something, go back to Safrandica."

"As my lord wills," Paxos murmured, and he sat down, leaned back, stared at the ceiling while Nkati took an eyedropper full of the stuff and put three drops in each eye. Their color went from robin's egg blue to a soft gold, like his hair - still no pupil, but Nkati looked satisfied, even overjoyed. She embraced him, and his arms went around her.

It was quiet, without Paxos around. Usually he wasn't terribly obtrusive - a few exchanges of words per day were enough to have him spending his hours diligently performing drills in the gym, or polishing things, or commanding the undead legions to cut the grass. But they were noticeable in their absence.

Kolex loved it.

He'd been such an idiot, locking himself into something so shortsighted without even considering the next thousand years as anything more than a rhetorical device. He didn't remember what he'd been thinking - Paxos was a useful servant, during wartime, but not that much better than the generals he'd recruited by normal means. Maybe he'd been counting on it damaging the opposition's morale. Which it had done; perhaps otherwise he'd have been completely defeated, instead of settling for the borders of what was now modern Kolxa and relaxing into a peace with the neighbors that wore smooth like seaglass over time. But probably it would have been nearly as good to bind Paxos for some specific number of centuries, or to the service of *Kolxa* rather than Kolex himself so he could be pushed off into a civil service position, or -

Well. Too late to go back and change his mind now. Hopefully Paxos was settling back in to the political process in Safrandica with a minimum of fuss.

Paxos had been gone for three weeks.

Kolex got the notification that Safrandica had declared war about four hours before Paxos reappeared at his side to drop to one knee.

Kolex lifted his face from his hands long enough to look at Paxos's eyes, gazing up at him. They were a bilious green, threaded through with blue at the edges and a pinpoint of gold remaining at the center of each.

"What have you done," Kolex said into his palms.

"I did as you asked, my lord," said Paxos. "I am ready to resume command of the legion, to finish the -"

" *No* ," Kalex snapped. "I - you -"

"My lord?"

"What about Nkati, did you do anything to her?"

"I behaved as she seemed to expect, until she left me in the heart of Safrandica to proceed with the next step of your plan."

"I did not *have* a plan."

"As you say, my lord," said Paxos, puzzled.

"Go and - stand guard in the observation tower," Kalex said, "come straight to me and tell me if you see any invading forces, I - have to - do other things."

"At once, my lord," replied Paxos, and he sprang to his feet and headed for the stairwell.

Kalex tapped out a few more texts to his minister of defense, and then, faced with the prospect of having to write something up for Risingsun and Nkati, instead delegated it so he could lock himself in his chambers and meditate on the length of eternity.

Natalie

"Pavel, good, you're here. Come with me," said a voice, a recognizable voice, unpleasant because it was my own as heard from the outside. "We have to save Natalie."

I looked up into my own face. He looked sleep-deprived, older, more recently from the barbershop, but nonetheless had my face. He was wearing a backpack, over a beat-up future version of a plaid flannel I'd bought in February.

"Who's Natalie?" I asked.

"Our daughter," said the other Pavel, and he seized me by the forearm and pulled me from the coffeeshop out onto the sidewalk.

I didn't have a daughter, but presumably that had happened while he'd been getting older. "When -?" I started to ask.

"You'll meet my wife in two years, Natalie comes along in four, in the timeline I left from she's six," Pavel replied. "Lars - you remember Lars?"

Lars and I had been roommates in college; he studied physics while I majored in bio. "From school? Yeah."

The other Pavel was still holding my wrist, tugging me along the pavement, but I wasn't really resisting, and I'd paid for my coffee in advance so the baristas weren't liable to chase me for dining and dashing. He turned a corner. "Well," he said, "Lars and his team have a major breakthrough. It's more complicated than 'time travel', but it's time travel."

"I had sort of guessed," I said.

"Doing it at all erases the future I'm from," he said. "We have a window of time, maybe a day, maybe two, before the energy recruited by collapsing the timelines runs out and it's just this one, going forward, and I'll never have existed. Lars is here now too, he's going to stop a big wildfire that would've happened this summer and a few other things. I came along because - preventing the fire will save Mom and Wanda and a lot of other people but it won't - it'd butterfly-effect Natalie, you see?"

"How does coming back here to grab me out of the café *not* butterfly-effect her?" I asked.

We crossed a street. "I brought back a sample," he said. "I'll tell you when and how to meet my wife, and then you've got to convince her to have Natalie instead of conceiving a random baby. She thinks it'll be pretty doable." I could guess, now, based on which way he tugged me and the business with the sample, that he was taking me to the lab where I worked as a tech. "From there she might be a little different just from details of her upbringing but it'll still be *her*."

I didn't have any kids, yet, but I could empathize with that. Genes determined a lot about someone. The other Pavel's six-year-old was gone, gone to save Mom and however many other people it took to convince Lars to rewind twelve years, but she could still be born. And if preventing the wildfire butterflyed another disaster into existence, well. I guessed I'd tag along with Lars for the ride with an insulated bag, carrying cells swiped from my daughter, to carry her to still another timeline. I wouldn't really have predicted it but there I was.

"Tell me about her?" I said as we continued our walk to the lab. By this point he'd let go of my arm.

"About Natalie or about Danica? - that's my wife, Danica."

"I'd meant Natalie, but Danica too."

He'd brought pictures - he had a futuristic little phone, turned out, I could barely tell how he was operating it, and he showed me a little girl, brown eyed, brown haired, squeezing a stuffed elephant. Another photo of the kid, sitting on a woman's lap - not really my type, but maybe she was more appealing in motion - wearing matching dresses and smiles. All three of them at Niagara Falls, Natalie on my - on his shoulders. The wedding photo, Danica in beads and satin, Pavel in a rental tux. A little looping video of Natalie running through a house that had my old coat on the rack and my old painting on the wall, towards the camera, yelling eeeeeeeeee before approaching out of view and presumably colliding with his legs.

"She's adorable," I said, though not having raised her from babyhood I found I didn't feel especially partial to her over random first-graders. Probably that happened due to hormone events that I had yet to experience.

"Isn't she!" he gushed. "She's doing great in first grade, she has two best friends, Chase and Autumn, she likes to draw..." He had pictures of the drawings, too, though he glanced at my face while he skipped through a series of rectangles full of scribbled stick figures and switched back to pictures of Natalie herself. There was a photo including, presumably, Chase and Autumn, Natalie in a birthday crown and all three of them laser-focused on slices of ice cream cake. Natalie as a toddler, ten seconds of a recording looped around as she wobbled unsteadily across a living room. Natalie as a new *baby*, my face aged in between now and Future Pavel's, limbs tucked under herself while she slept on his chest and he looked at her with all the wonder and awe I'd ever felt and then some. All right, I was warming up to her.

The walk was long enough that eventually Future Pavel handed me his phone to flip through. Natalie gesturing elaborately to an audience of dolls. Natalie with a mermaid band-aid on her arm and a lollipop sticking out of her mouth. Natalie and the stuffed elephant,

fast asleep in a bed with unicorns all over the sheets, wearing pajamas printed with kittens. Natalie and me at the library, browsing through the juvenile nonfiction. - Natalie and me. My little girl. All I had to do was a little routine lab work, six years from now. After presumably marrying Danica, who must have a heck of a personality. But she showed up in the pictures too, in scenes I could slot myself into. Danica and Natalie making cookies together, laughing, sleeves and faces covered in flour. Danica holding a smaller Natalie in her lap to go down a playground slide. Danica and me, her pregnant, me enthralled. All three of us, somebody's thumb photobombing the shot, in front of an aquarium tank, with Natalie pressing her whole little self up as close as she could get to a shark.

I had a card key to the side door of the lab, which was more convenient coming to it from this direction, and while I was running it through the scanner, he said, "So there you are!"

I looked over my shoulder, and - it hadn't been him. Or rather, it hadn't been that one of him.

There were now two future Pavels, the one in the plaid flannel I'd walked with and another in a green sweater I didn't recognize but would (apparently) feel moved to buy if I saw it for sale.

"Oh," said Plaid Pavel. "Shit."

"My feelings exactly," said Sweater Pavel.

"If I'm going to clone your Natalie anyway, I can save his sample too," I said, "have both of them, unless Danica'll only want one kid?"

"Who's Danica?" said Sweater Pavel.

" *Shit* ," said Plaid Pavel.

"You didn't marry a Danica?" I asked Sweater Pavel.

He shook his head. "Caroline Moore - you've met her, Joel's sister. Still named the kid Natalie though." I'd met Joel's sister, though only in passing - maybe with more exposure we'd really hit it off? She was better-looking than Danica, though I wasn't about to say that to Plaid Pavel's face.

"...well," I said, "uh, let's label the samples Caroline's Natalie and Danica's Natalie, and get them squared away safely, and then talk it out?"

They eyed each other, but peaceably enough came into the lab with me.

"I guess as soon as Lars flipped on the time machine, you were just a possible future of many, and so there's... maybe many of you?" I asked, getting the labelmaker from my co-worker's empty desk. The lab was usually unoccupied on Saturdays, though sometimes somebody'd come in, like I was doing now, to pick up a forgotten bag or check on a project.

"Maybe," said Plaid Pavel, giving me for the first time an objective view of what I sound like when I'm despairing enough to listen to bad emo music. I didn't like it.

"What is your problem?" Sweater Pavel asked him, as I printed off DANICA'S NATALIE to stick to whatever test tube or similar Plaid was about to hand me.

"If there's more of us we don't have as much time as I thought," said Plaid. "I thought I'd have long enough to explain, put everything in context - I didn't have long enough to write a letter, Lars was all set to go without me if I didn't get in with the sample pronto -"

"What is there to explain?" I asked. "Just how to get with Danica - if, uh, I decide to, I guess -"

"- yes," said Plaid. "But the way I did it was that I... took a sign language class... that she was teaching... because she's deaf. And so is Natalie."

"...ah," I said. I had sort of wondered why a six year old would run to her dad yelling "eeeeee" instead of "daddy, daddy" but I'd brushed it off, kids were weird.

Sweater was looking at Plaid like he'd just won at chess and was too magnanimous to gloat. He pulled out his own futuristic phone thing and showed me a little girl: blonde, hazel-eyed, plump and dimply, delighted with her block tower, and then another picture of the same girl grinning gaptoothed beside Caroline at the piano, playing a duet

-

"Shit," said one of them, and when I looked up, it was a third future Pavel.

Behind him, a fourth leaned into the doorframe.

The labelmaker printed DANICA'S NATALIE v2 (PARKA), and then SARALYNN'S NATALIE and SARALYNN'S ALEXANDER, and then IRENE'S DAVID, and then CAROLINE'S WILLIAM, and then it ran out of label tape before William's little siblings could be added.

"I'll put the rest of them in plastic bags, I'm sure there's a Sharpie around," I said.

None of my future selves objected to this plan. They were mostly glaring at each other, occasionally whipping out their phones to show each other and me particularly cute pictures. Mavis's little Hunter, half-Korean but with my chin, on my dad's lap gazing with huge eyes at his birthday cake. Caroline's set of twins belonging to Windbreaker Pavel, posed in complementary outfits in a pile of autumn leaves. And Natalie after Natalie after Natalie. Natalies with dark hair and light hair and one who'd been allowed to chalk her

curls pink and purple. Natalies with dogs and with cats and one with a parakeet. Natalies who could speak Korean as well as English, and Natalies who signed instead of speaking at all. Natalies who could read, Natalies who were too young to read, one Natalie who was dyslexic. Natalies on pony rides and roller coasters and my own future shoulders.

I wrote down the names of women I'd never met and a few I had, and the names of their children who had never existed, whose fathers had hitched a ride out of a dying timeline to give them life in a world without the wildfire. Because none of those kids sat on my *mom's* lap in any of those pictures. Even in the future with kids to think about I'd be able to do the math, but that evidently wouldn't stop me from trying to cheat a fate more total than death for my progeny.

Fleece Vest Pavel, father of KATE'S NATALIE, had stolen my co-worker's yellow legal pad and was scribbling furiously.

"What are you writing?" asked Hoodie Pavel, one of the ones who'd married a Mavis.

"I don't want him to marry Kate," said Fleece Vest. "I wish I hadn't married Kate, should have divorced her sooner, and as soon as I vanish I," he gestured at me, "won't've ever met her. But my Nat's six months old, it doesn't make a difference to me who raises her instead of Kate. With enough stock tips he could afford surrogates, nannies -"

There was a murmur of understanding among the other Pavels. It probably said something about me that this was the first any of us had thought of making me rich.

I let them pass around pages of the legal pad to write down what to invest in, what to pull out of when. The husbands of Danicas were also putting their heads together about how the Danica in this timeline would feel about a mansionful of nanny-raised clones in her

life. Caroline's husbands were planning a date for me to take her on, to put her in a receptive frame of mind. Mavis's husbands were trying to remember between them when her gigantic dream house had first gone on sale. The one who'd married Saralynn and the one who'd married Irene knew things about cryptocurrency and international exchange rates, respectively. "But," said Irene's husband, "you'll have to keep in mind that you'll change all this by entering the market in any big way, and also so will *Lars* . So don't go nuts, something might change."

"Is Kate's ex," I said, gesturing at Fleece Vest, "the only one who doesn't want me to marry their wife, or is there an obvious way to go when you can compare?"

Pavels looked at each other.

"Because," I said, "the important thing is the kids, right, any of you would rather I find a way to clone your Natalie with a different mom rather than marry your wife without doing that?"

They started talking again, a hubbub becoming an uproar. I caught only bits of it. The pro-Mavis crowd seemed to have the strongest objective case - Mavis came from money, had a lot of compatible hobbies, spoke perfect English but taught the kids Korean, didn't pick fights, cooked and decorated, iffy in-laws but nobody's perfect. But I had to acknowledge that the Danica camp were terrifically passionate even if their only verbalizable supporting arguments were that Danica was really funny and good in bed and learning sign language wasn't that hard. I heard Irene's husband say, "I love her" - but obviously all of them loved theirs, except the one who'd gotten stuck with Kate. I wished I had time to ask how that had happened in the first place.

Sweater Pavel was the first to vanish, and when the pop of air rushing into the space he vacated cut through the babble, everyone stopped. By some means - probably related to time travel details

affecting their remaining lifespans that they knew and I didn't - they formed an orderly line at the sample freezer. Each checked that their bags marked things like MAVIS'S NATALIE (LEATHER JACKET) and DANICA'S EDWARD were all well-ordered and that the labelmaker'd CAROLINE'S NATALIE was unharmed by its deliverer never having existed.

Leather Jacket Pavel, bringing up the rear of the line, rounded up all the sheets of paper with advice and notes and instructions and a couple hard-copy photographs of Natalies. He pressed them into my hands, silently. There wasn't time to go through a whole presentation about the virtues of Mavis over Caroline, of Saralynn over Danica, no time to post-mortem whatever had happened with Kate. Just a freezer full of lifelines for their children that I might be able to instantiate - to save - a handful of, if I could explain all this to one of these women without sounding insane.

They were mostly right about who needed to go first in the line at the freezer. Leather Jacket Pavel was the last one left, in the end.

"- is that a gun?" I asked him; now that there weren't a ton of other Pavels drawing the eye I could see it bulging in his back pocket.

"Oh. Yeah. I forgot how weird that would seem now," he said.
"Maybe ask Lars if he -"

And then he was gone.

Lars said his future selves had, upon discovering that there were more than enough of them to deal with the fire, distributed themselves appropriately among other problems, including the one that led to my future self packing heat. Also, since Lars'd been on the time machine team to begin with, rather than a last-minute addition to an already planned trip, he'd had time to write himself letters. It sounded like his encounter with himself had gone in a more orderly fashion. It also sounded like he was maybe judging me

a little, though he didn't say so out loud. I didn't call him on it. I supposed "you don't have kids, you don't understand" was obvious enough to go unsaid.

Of course, I didn't have kids either. I wouldn't understand until I made up my mind about what to do. Which little packages to defrost.

I didn't want thirty kids. Did I have to have thirty kids? What about the Pavels who hadn't happened to still be friends with Lars, or who'd gotten stuck in traffic, or whose Natalies had died in car crashes by the time the machine was ready so they couldn't be sampled? There had been more Larses than Pavels, more than twice as many. Maybe some Pavels didn't even have kids, and had felt no urgency about going back in time. There had to be possible future Pavels who had trusted their past selves, trusted me, to manage my life as made sense for me in the moment. Who didn't have kids to save.

I looked at my assembled notes and started compiling them, trying to do sensemaking. The Pavels who married Danica were so adamant that I shouldn't rule her out just because I'd have to learn another language and the corresponding Natalies would never know my voice. Caroline had the advantage that I'd met her before and that limited my hypothetical ability to be deceptive about her quality, but I didn't know her *that* well and her husbands hadn't been the most enthusiastic of the pack. The Mavis contingent looked great on paper, but were they trying to give their kids an edge by covering up latent marital issues? Would I do that? Screw myself over to promote my children's chances of existing? Or, not screw myself over - they were all still married, not like Kate's ex - but cheat myself of some kind of joy, to give my baby a chance to be born.

I wasn't sure but it didn't seem out of the question.

Could I even have my pick of these women, if I were going into the meet-cutes already changed? Maybe they didn't like the kind of guy who'd been cornered by a pack of his future possibilities and floated the idea of impregnating them with clones. Maybe I would meet somebody else who did like that kind of thing. Somehow.

Well. That would give me a way to narrow it down. I could run around and encounter them all and see which one suited me as I was. Except Kate. Probably.

I started the tedious work of processing all the samples into more suitable long-term lab storage, with more suitably redundant labeling, one by one. In case I ever wanted any of them.

I might. Some of them.

Probably not thirty.

And maybe I wanted the experience my future selves had, of rolling the dice, seeing what me and someone else would make together.

Though I had to admit, flipping through my pile of photographs, some of them were *especially* cute...

Moments

Ivy first managed to stop time when her baby was two weeks old.

Baby Willow, asleep on Ivy's chest, legs frogged up under her, stopped breathing. Ivy didn't notice that right away. Ivy was focusing on her meditation, on her own sense of time, waiting for it to pop into clarity at a new angle like an optical illusion; she wasn't listening to Willow breathe. Ivy noticed that *she* couldn't breathe.

People in stopped time, who'd meditated long enough in just the right way, could move things - they could open doors and pick locks, tidy their houses and trash their neighbors', set fires though not see them burn, turn faucets though not see them flow. A meditator could move plants, too. But not animals, and not people. People had the right textures, Ivy had heard. Reach out and pull a curl and it would bounce back; squeeze a love handle and it would give. But you couldn't move a whole person around. It was probably the reason everything was taking so long to completely fall apart. You couldn't lock your door overnight any more, not really, but you could sleep in front of it, if it opened inward.

Willow wasn't breathing and her heart wasn't beating and she was fine. She just wasn't proceeding through time. Ivy had done it. And she'd done it while she was breathing out, and now her chest had no room to rise under her stationary daughter.

She held on. Meditators didn't have normal physical needs, while they were stopped. She didn't understand all the philosophy behind it, she just knew she wasn't going to need to breathe, supposedly. She held on, looking out the window at a frozen bee halted between two flowers.

Eventually she'd not-breathed long enough to be convinced. It wasn't comfortable, mostly because it involved holding unnaturally still, but she'd gotten used to holding still, trying to master the meditation.

She hadn't liked the idea, at first. There were so many reasons not to want to be one of them. Ivy didn't know who they *were*, but her whole little town was slathered in graffiti, and there was nothing worth having left in the stores any more, especially paint. People kept dying, and a lot of those people were police, so even if the world hadn't been collapsing in every other way at the same time it would have been hard to figure out who, let alone catch them. Ivy wasn't sure if something about stopping time just *made* you a criminal, or if it was just a few people with a lot of stopped time on their hands.

Ivy's mother had, when things first started getting bad, spent all her savings on buying MREs a few zip codes away so no one would think their house was the obvious place to look. Looking back, Ivy could barely remember what had spooked them that early on. Maybe just the abstract idea of this being as easy to learn as how to stumble through a conversation in Spanish was enough to give an inkling. So Ivy had a lot of MREs in the basement, and had been eating them whenever the armored truck with the cornmeal and beans and strategic cheese reserve hadn't been by lately. That wouldn't last forever, though.

Ivy tried to get out from under Willow, but she didn't have enough room to scoot her chair. She dreaded, suddenly, letting time go on again. Everything was coming to pieces. Ivy's mother had been missing since Ivy had been in her second trimester. The armored trucks might stop coming at any time.

If Ivy wanted to live a life, she was going to have to do it in stopped time, and every real second that passed was another chance for

someone to pry the boards off her windows and come into her house.

Eventually, Ivy managed to squirm out from under Willow. Willow hung in the air, sleeping contentedly, and Ivy wedged cushions from the couch and a spare blanket under the baby till she had a new surface to rest on. Time would start again, if Ivy got herself killed somehow, and - realistically there was no way Willow would live, if that happened, no one else was going to come through for her, and she was two weeks old, but she didn't have to start by falling. And if Ivy needed to restart time on purpose, for some reason, while she was out and about, but she still came home afterwards, this way Willow might still be sleeping then.

It probably said something about her that she thought of the second possibility after the first.

Meditators didn't need to sleep, but Ivy was still exhausted. She wasn't going to get any tireder, not when tiredness was a thing that moved with the sun, but she *could* sleep, and that was the first thing she did while her baby paused breathlessly on a heap of pillows that had yet to dimple with her weight. Ivy crept into her bed, the one she hadn't slept in since Willow was born because she needed the space her mother's bed afforded to sleep next to the baby. In the perfect silence of her meditation, in the perfect darkness of the boarded-shut windows, Ivy slept.

There was no way to tell how much sleep she'd needed. The clock wouldn't have advanced if she had lain there for a week. A year. Her bladder wouldn't have woken her, though her dreams might have. But eventually, Ivy opened her eyes, and she wasn't tired.

She lay awake, and she wished that was all time-stopping was good for. If all you could do when the world was still was sleep, that would

have been so much better. Sleep, and rest, and think. Not everything else.

But that wasn't how it worked for everyone else.

So it wasn't how it worked for her, either.

Which was mostly bad, because most people were everyone else, but it meant that she could use the meditation for more than catching up on sleep around her baby.

Ivy opened her door and stepped out into the world.

Graffiti, everywhere. There hadn't been anything new springing into existence nearby for months - paint was not something anyone bothered to put in an armored truck to send through the towns that were still standing. But there'd been a lot of it accumulating in the early days.

Someone had had a whole artistic career up and down 14th St, once the gas stations ran out of gas and there weren't cars in the way any more, on the walls and the sidewalks and the street, starting at the south end with amateur tags and ending, two minutes' walk north of Ivy's house, with a mural on the asphalt that spanned six blocks and depicted the story of Genesis with really jawdropping loveliness. Ivy had seen it before - she had to walk that way to get water, nowadays - but she hadn't stopped to look at it. She spent as little time outside as possible, and when she went out, she wore her mother's clothes, ill-fitting and layered. When she saw other people they were mostly doing the same thing, which limited how much it could help with not standing out as a target, but better to blend in than to dress like she had last year.

Ivy had plenty of opportunity to stop to look at the art, now. She could see the whole town as an art gallery. The 14th St paintings were the most dramatic but there were projects everywhere. She had been confused before but saw, now that she had the ability

herself, how of course once you could stop time you'd want to leave it that way for a while, and of course, if you could do that, you might not be ready to go back to the flow of time before you got bored. And if you were bored, you might - steal a lot of stuff from the hardware store and make a giant dinosaur, apparently.

There was something so peaceful about walking through the town, alone, silent apart from her own footsteps and her own breath. Outdoors, without peeping into anyone's house to see if they were home, it was like everyone was already dead. Like the end of the world had had a little longer to go on, and everyone was starved or suicided, and Ivy was walking among the painted ruins before the plants took it all for scaffolding and the rain washed the crumbs of civilization away.

Her feet didn't tire as she walked. She didn't get hungry, or thirsty; she didn't sweat, or need to. Those privations belonged to the flow of time.

She could stay like this for years, if she liked. She could go back to her baby when she was old enough to be a mother.

At first, Ivy nervously checked on Willow every now and then - she couldn't tell how often "now and then" was exactly, but she wandered farther and farther from home before she anxiously doubled back to make sure nothing had unaccountably befallen the baby. Eventually she no longer felt the need. Willow was right where she left her. Nothing was going to jump out of a shadow and startle Ivy into starting time again while she was miles away from home. Even if she did lose hold of the meditation, she could take it up again before Willow had even finished settling into the pillows under her, and get home then.

Ivy hadn't gone into learning to stop time with a very clear goal, beyond a kind of dread about the prospect of being one of the

dwindling number of people who couldn't do it. There were other motivations, of course, things harder to put into words - something about safety, something about having time to metaphorically breathe, something about wanting more of her life to take place in a time when there were still some vestiges of a society even if she couldn't use most of them right now. Once Willow had been born, the utility had become much more obvious.

Fortunately she'd started months before that, practicing when she had nothing else to do. Which was often. The local schools hadn't been in session since October. She had a shortlist of people who might have killed the creepy band conductor, but didn't know who had that much of a grudge against the principal, or the history teacher, or - well, at any rate, school had been closed, and nobody had asked for her textbooks back so sometimes she looked at them a little on her own. The Internet still worked sometimes, but not reliably; same with the electricity. The library had closed - sort of - the librarians were no longer going to work, but the doors had been left propped open, and there were signs saying the books were free for the taking. Still, going there seldom seemed worthwhile to Ivy when she would have had to waddle there, out where anyone might see her and she wouldn't even have a broken window to guess by -

She exhausted the library's remaining ability to interest her after - some long while in paused time. The books weren't well organized any more. She was far from the first person to loiter here for subjective ages, and no librarians were cleaning up the accumulated tornado of misplaced materials. And when she'd finished with her local library; and looked at all the art; and spent as long as she cared to swimming in the reservoir holding her breath forever; and found enough still, soft wild squirrels and owls and rabbits to run her hands along; and looked for art supplies in the wrecks of the stores downtown and used up all the modeling clay she could find on great colorful mounds of tiny sculptures; then. Then she asked herself if she felt old enough.

She didn't. So she left town.

Ivy walked. Bicycles worked fine in stopped time, and for that reason she hadn't laid eyes on one in months. She debated with herself as she ambled up the highway whether she'd take one if she found one. It would make her part of the problem, in a way that the modeling clay didn't - the stores were already abandoned, but a bicycle would have an owner. Of course, they might have stolen it themselves, but she had no way to check.

It was moot. She didn't see any bicycles that weren't being ridden, except for through house windows, protected by that little extra reluctance to break into a home, and in one case, with a sleeping man draped half-over his bike's frame so it couldn't be moved.

The silence was getting to her. She sang to herself, not well, and talked to herself. It worried her a little, that she might be going insane from the isolation.

That was something that happened to people, she knew. Early on, the news still ran, and the stories were about things like all the abortion doctors in three states being murdered in an instant, or synagogues being shot up and covered beam to cornerstone with graffiti, or a rash of murders of single parents whose exes wanted custody, or every uniformed police officer in a county shot with their own gun, or a political assassination tally so long every day they condensed it into a single feature - it had seemed like a lot of murder. Maybe more murder than would have been reasonable to expect, even if anyone who'd seen that post or one of its copies could learn to stop time.

Anyway, some of the news anchors had speculated that it was people staying in stopped time too long, going crazy, committing some murders. But Ivy didn't think so. She didn't want to kill people. She thought that probably lots of folks did want to kill people, and didn't have a way to do it, and then everyone in the world was

handed a weapon at the same time, a perfect one, and some of them used it. And some of them used it a lot.

Ivy wondered how many brothers and sisters Willow had.

The city nearest Ivy's hometown wasn't a big city, and that was good. The big cities had seen the worst destruction the soonest. Too many people, too concentrated, too reliant on things being shipped in and out. This city was worse off than Ivy's town, but it wasn't on fire, and only a couple buildings were set off with caution tape.

She pretended, as she walked the streets, that she was considering moving here. Maybe she had a job waiting, she could wash dishes and spend most of her paycheck on living with four other single moms rotating all the kids between them. She could live... there, that looked like a nice house. It was empty. Maybe the owners had fled to Canada in case Canada was better. Ivy didn't expect it was, but she couldn't blame them for optimism.

When she was bored of that pretense she pretended that she was here a hundred years in the future, when everyone who wanted to stop time and run amok had already done it and all the dust had settled, and she was going to raze this place to the ground and build a beautiful futuristic forest of skyscrapers, with robots. She'd fix the street layout so she didn't keep getting turned around in the hilly places. She'd put in a park every two blocks. She'd put in a subway. And aerial gondolas, stretched from building to building, like in Disney World.

Probably she wasn't old enough yet if she was still thinking about Disney World. Had it been even a year? Ivy didn't know. Maybe she was still sixteen. She etched out a little math on a scrap of receipt paper she found in the gutter. It would have taken her... wow, only ten hours to walk here from her home town, so that didn't give her much of a benchmark. Why didn't people walk that distance before?

Maybe she'd just forgotten what it was like to be tired and thirsty and have her feet hurt. Or maybe she'd forgotten what it was like to be in a hurry.

She supposed she might never be in a hurry again.

There was one of the armored trucks, paused in the middle of the main drag of the city. The airlock opening in the back was shut, with a guard stationed in front of the outer door so no one could get by even if they forced it. Ivy couldn't see inside this one but she knew how they worked; another National Guardsman would be inside, fetching a ration from the main compartment, and when she let them move on, he'd close the inner door, open the outer one, and maintain a tight hold on the ration till it had been dispensed to whoever still lived here. Ivy looked around and spotted an old man peeping out of a second-story window at the truck. Probably he'd run to meet the Guardsman at the door and then clutch tight his food till he got it wherever they kept things. Or someone else from the family was already at the door, and she just couldn't see because there was cardboard over the downstairs windows.

This couldn't go on. In this moment, Ivy was the one watching; in the next moment, when she'd gone home to get Willow, someone else would have the run of the place. Someone else might decide to ransack the old man's house and do whatever they had to to get past his locks on his rations, and they'd take the food all the way to their cabin in the woods and keep doing that till they had enough to last all year, never mind that the old man could starve.

Ivy was climbing the tree in the old man's front yard to get a better look at him and his home, to imagine what he was like, when she saw, out of the corner of her eye, something moving.

Her first thought was that it had to be part of the tree that she'd moved herself, a branch springing back into place or a leaf she'd

dislodged starting to drop before then leaving her sphere of influence. But no, it had been farther away than that - something past that fence -

Ivy clambered down the tree and ran towards the movement. It was tall enough to be hard to climb over, but apparently someone had had that problem before her, and there was a yard chair pulled over and positioned so she could step on its seat, and its back, and then vault the fence. This let her out into a neighbor's backyard, the pool drained and full of trash; she skirted it and came to a stop at the far corner of the pool yard, looking around at the stretch of more yards and more houses. Maybe it had been a leaf after all.

"Hello?" Ivy cried out, voice sounding too high and strained even to herself. She would need to practice before she went home. Didn't want Willow to have some kind of stopped-time-accent when she learned to talk. "Hello? Is someone there?" Better that time.

There was no reply, but there was also - not silence, there was some kind of noise that wasn't just Ivy's own breath - she stopped breathing to listen -

"I don't want to hurt you!" Ivy called, when that wasn't conclusive. "I'm harmless, honest!"

There was motion again, off to her right, and she turned, and there was a man, older than her, maybe eighteen or nineteen, though really nowadays it was impossible to tell by looking. This didn't have to be the first time he'd paused, he could really be a hundred.

"Hello?" Ivy said in a small voice. Her whole adventure fit in between two heartbeats, but it felt like her heart should have been hammering in her chest. She held her breath, once she'd spoken, so she wouldn't have to listen to her own air, when she could be listening to the sound of another person, a moving living person, not a mystery behind a window.

"Hello," he said, marveling. He took a step toward her, then another. "What are the chances..." He was quite close now, and Ivy, frozen like a rabbit, tried to guess whether she needed to adopt the most defensive pose she could and flicker in and back out of time to get rid of him, or if he'd just kind of forgotten how personal space worked. He tilted his head, looking at her, and she decided it was probably the latter.

"I don't know," Ivy said. "Maybe it happens a lot."

"But not so you'd meet people. If we're pausing in the same moment as somebody in China we'll never find them..."

She thought of saying that they might find their Chinese counterpart if they went to China, but of course not everyone was going to stay in the meditation as long as that. Even if someone did, it would be a needle in a haystack to locate them, even if you knew their position to the precision of whether they were in China. Instead she said: "What's your name? I'm Ivy." She could call herself something else but it wasn't likely he could do her any harm with just a first name.

"Aidan."

"Aidan," she repeated. She hadn't learned anyone's name in so long. The last time she'd learned someone's name was when Willow had been born and had looked more like a Willow than a Summer. "It's nice to meet you."

"You too," he said, and then there was silence, except it wasn't silence. Ivy had met silence, and silence didn't have another person breathing in it, arm's reach away from her.

"Is this your first time?" she asked him, eventually.

"My first time pausing? No," he said. "I wasn't an *early* early adopter, but I knew how to do it before it was, uh." He looked at the dilapidated city around them. The pool full of trash, the house across

the way burned to a skeleton of cinders, the windows everywhere broken or boarded or both, the - there was a man in the process of bleeding to death, over on the park bench. He looked maybe Middle Eastern, which wasn't good but at least wasn't as personally relevant to Ivy as if someone were going around slitting all the black people's throats. Someone had killed that man, maybe just a second ago, and he wouldn't finish dying until Ivy and Aidan let him.

Quiet, again, and then Ivy said, "It's my first time. I didn't want to start trying until - not that long ago. Do you know how long we've been in this moment? Is there a way to tell?"

"You can count - seconds and minutes, but not really hours, unless you're walking the whole time," said Aidan, shaking his head. "You can sing ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall, and see how far you get. I don't know a trick for knowing how many days."

"I haven't been walking the whole time," said Ivy. She drifted through the weedy yards toward the dying man on the bench. She sat down beside him. He wasn't, now that she looked closely, sitting fully on the bench. He might have been walking down the sidewalk when he'd been slashed, and then - yes, there in midair there was some blood, spraying *that* way, and he'd collapsed just so but he wasn't yet seated. Ivy brushed some of his bangs out of his eyes.

"People are monsters," said Aidan, behind her. Ivy'd nearly forgotten he was there.

"Enough are," said Ivy.

Aidan seemed to struggle with what to say, quiet-not-silent ruminating noises drifting over Ivy's shoulder while she tried to guess whether there was any saving the man. She didn't have any medical background at all. She could find something to bandage his neck with, but would that help, or would she just wind up choking him or not stopping the bleeding at all or finding something that wasn't sterile enough and giving him an infection? Would the

murderer come back in five minutes and try harder, stab him through the heart?

"I wonder how long there will be anyone left," Ivy said.

"I don't think *everyone's* going to die," said Aidan, "there's got to be - people in the middle of nowhere, with farms or something. People who nobody has a reason to work that hard to find, even if they're -" He looked at the man. "- racist? I guess?"

"Maybe," said Ivy. "That'd be nice. I guess I'd like to find a place like that, only I don't know if they'd let anybody in who knows how to do this." She could maybe drop off Willow, though. If she found a nice place where she'd be safe.

"What would they do about it?" said Aidan. "You could make them -" He seemed, after a pause, to realize what he was saying. "You wouldn't have to tell them."

"I think it'd maybe take a lot of looking," Ivy said. "The kind you can't even do if you have to eat and sleep still. So they'd be able to guess."

"Maybe," said Aidan. "You're - maybe they'd figure you're harmless anyhow, you look young and stuff -"

"I don't know how long we've been, uh, now," Ivy said, before she realized that had nothing to do with how old she looked. She wouldn't age a day till she let a day go by. "But I'm sixteen."

"- only sixteen," he said. "Really?"

Was he saying she looked older or something? Ivy could imagine having been offended by that a year ago. "Really. I'd be a junior this year, if, you know, school."

"Oh," said Aidan.

Was he going to run off and ignore her for not being old enough to vote? It wasn't like she was going to risk voting even if she made it to eighteen. She didn't even know who the President was at this point. It had taken the Secret Service a while to get someone obscurely far down in the line of succession safely into a secure-enough bunker before they were announced as president. By then she'd stopped paying attention. What a way to get the first female president, and the second, and the third...

"I guess I'm kind of bad at ages," said Aidan. "I wasn't trying to - never mind."

"It's okay," she said. "I'd like to be older. That's why I'm here, I mean now. I want to, you know, grow up. Before the world ends." The acquaintance wasn't long enough for her to tell him about Willow.

"I'm twenty-one," he told her. "Not counting the pausing."

"Huh," she said. "Is that grown up, do you suppose?"

Aidan didn't answer right away. Then he said, "Nah."

"Oh. Well. All the time in the world. Kind of."

"If that's what you want to do is grow up it'll be easier with two people in the same moment," he said.

"Would you do that?" Ivy asked. "Stay with me till I'm - old enough?"

"Yeah," said Aidan.

Aidan had at some point acquired some woodworking skills. Maybe just by being older than her and having had the opportunity before the meditation was all over the internet, maybe he'd once broken

into a woodshop and played around with things and happened not to lose any fingers. At any rate, he had a chessboard he'd made himself, squirreled away in the empty house he'd been using. "I found it like this," he assured Ivy while he was setting it up. "I think they packed up and left months ago, maybe even before the downtown fire."

Ivy had been able to see the smoke from home. The arsonist hadn't gone to redo their work after the firefighters put it out, fortunately. A good thing that people didn't hate firefighters the way they hated cops. She hadn't heard of any firefighters being killed. "I haven't been staying anywhere in particular."

"I didn't use to," Aidan said. "I'd just bum around, leave whatever I picked up or made wherever. But eventually I wanted someplace to come back to, you know? It's a nice enough house. And I don't fall asleep while time's passing so I figure it's pretty safe."

"That makes sense. Do you stay in the city?"

"Not always. I went and saw the White House. It's a wreck, obviously, but it's still standing. I went to New York for a while. Once I went to Disney World, it's still closed but there were a bunch of people who coordinated to run some of the rides for each other."

"Do you have a bicycle?" It would be so far to walk.

"I did. I wrecked it a while ago. Had to walk back from Florida. Saw some neat things on the way, though. There was an alligator zoo, it looked like a guy was trying to keep some of the gators alive on pastured chickens."

"That's sweet," Ivy decided.

"I'm not sure he wasn't eating the gators," allowed Aidan.

"They're edible?"

"Yeah, I saw some signs offering fried gator tail. I guess it could be a marketing gimmick and it's just nuggets." He shrugged. He settled on where he thought the queens and kings should go, whether the bishops or the knights went on the outside - Ivy didn't know if he was right and they couldn't very well look it up online. It was good enough. They both knew how the pieces moved. Ivy turned the board so she could play white, and advanced a pawn.

Aidan won the first game, and Ivy won the second game, and they didn't set up for a third, instead going to a garden Aidan knew about. It was mostly abandoned and had gotten pretty weedy. There were a few people in it. One was looking despairingly at irrigation parts he was digging up with hands covered to the wrists in mulch. Ivy couldn't tell if he was stealing or trying to do maintenance to keep the plants alive. Another was just sitting on a bench overlooking the lotus pond. Her gaze was locked on a dragonfly where it hung in midair, frozen as though trapped in amber.

Aidan knew a lot of places to show her. He seemed to like having someone to bring along when he revisited all the most beautiful ruins and wild places he'd seen, someone to burrow into the library stacks with and come up with book reports to swap, someone to harmonize badly with while they hiked up a mountain.

They talked about - not everything. He didn't ask about her family. She didn't ask about his. They talked about everything except themselves and where they were from. They might as well have sprung fully formed into this still and silent instant. But they talked about everything else.

Aidan never touched her, Ivy noticed. It only occurred to her after some unknowable length of time spent following a river down to the sea to make sandcastles and stopping in every town on the way. He often stood quite close to her, but he never nudged her with an elbow or tapped her on the shoulder. Even when they walked through the halls of an art museum, looking at everything too

obscure for anyone to bother stealing while the world came down around their ears, talking in unnecessary whispers out of respect for the solemnity of the dark windowless aisles, he didn't reach out to brush his fingers over her knuckles, or link their pinkies together.

On the beach, they spent what felt like a lifetime's worth of trial and error, demolishing other sandcastles other meditators had left, scooping wet sand by the bucketload, making a castle roofed with a trashbag heaped with more sand still. It was big enough for them to huddle inside. He gave her about an inch, in there, and Ivy closed the distance and leaned on him.

Aidan went perfectly still, and then, ever so carefully, shifted his weight away from her. There wasn't a lot of room; he wound up brushing against the sand wall, and a few grains dribbled down his arm.

"What?" Ivy asked, sitting up straight again.

"It's... you shouldn't," he said.

"We've been hanging out for God knows how long, now," she said. "Can't you tell me?"

Aidan shook his head.

"Aidan -"

"Maybe later. Maybe when I've grown up enough I'll talk about it." He smiled at her weakly. "I'm probably not even thirty yet."

Ivy probably wasn't even eighteen yet. She was increasingly unsure about seventeen. She might be seventeen. Mothers shouldn't be seventeen, though, she thought. Twenty would be better. "Okay," she murmured. "So that's a no on hugs."

"Yeah. Sorry."

They found a woman standing on a pier, hand over her eyes against the sun, looking out onto the water. Ivy hugged her. The woman didn't hug back, obviously, but she felt warm and real, as though Ivy had just happened to hug someone whose hands were too full to respond.

When Ivy was done with her hug she turned and saw Aidan was looking away, staring into the stalk-eyes of a crab crouched in the shallow part of a wave.

Ivy and Aidan were trying to build a house in the woods out of sticks and rocks. It wasn't working very well, but it was fun. "I guess not many people try this," she remarked. "Or there wouldn't be any branches left."

"Or maybe somebody goes around knocking down houses sometimes," Aidan suggested. "It's not like ours would be hard to push over." It was bigger than the sandcastle but not by very much. They didn't have any nails; Ivy was trying to stick things together with pine sap.

Eventually they had an assembly of wood that stood up, pretty much, even if it was full of gaps that would have let in wind and rain if those could happen in a single instant. Ivy ducked inside.

"I might try to sleep," Ivy said. "That was the first thing I did, when I paused, I went to bed. I haven't since. But what I want is to be older, you know, and most people get older while also sleeping sometimes."

"It took me a while to get the hang of sleeping when I'm not tired at all," Aidan said. "Or, no, at first it was very easy, and then it got harder when I got more - I don't know, interested in being awake, or something? And then I figured out how to nap anyway when I wanted."

Ivy collected a bunch of dead leaves and wrapped them in her hoodie. Her mother's hoodie, that she hadn't changed out of even when it was safe as houses to go out into the street dressed in something that fit and suited her. It wasn't a great pillow, but having conceived of the idea she found she didn't want to hike to town to get a real one, since it would take a lot of rummaging to find a pillow she was willing to take.

"Are you going to nap?" she asked.

"Not right now," said Aidan. "I won't go far. I'll keep an eye out for anybody else in the same moment as us, hm?"

Ivy giggled. It was so unlikely but it was sweet of him to offer. "Thank you." She plopped her head down on the leaf-hoodie and closed her eyes.

Sleeping was hard, but she kept very still, and breathed slowly - it helped that she didn't need to breathe at all.

Time didn't-pass.

"Ivy?" said Aidan, softly, or maybe she dreamed it.

Silence, except for Ivy's slow breaths. Sometimes imagining what she might dream about ahead of time helped her fall asleep. She could dream about flying. About taking Willow somewhere safe - on the Moon, why not -

"I wish you'd tell me where you're from," Aidan murmured. "So I could be sure I've never seen you before. I hope I never saw you before."

What a weird thing to say.

Ivy fell asleep.

Ivy didn't think much more about the dreamy memory of what Aidan might or might not have said. They found a canoe by a lake, and Aidan carved them some paddles when none were in evidence, and they paddled around, and swam, and went down into the murk, breaths held as long as they liked in the eternal instant they shared.

When they both felt like they were done down there - especially given that any time they ran into a fish it kind of hurt, as the fish did not get out of the way - they floated in the water, looking up at the blue blue sky.

"Sometimes I think," said Ivy, "that being bored is just being anxious with a different word."

"How do you mean?" Aidan asked.

"I mean... suppose this were a summer camp, this lake and what's around it, and I was here for summer camp. I would have to breathe, obviously, but even apart from that I think it would be different. I'd have a deadline. I remember when I went to camp before, I'd feel like... any time I zoned out and let all afternoon go by, swimming or making friendship bracelets or hanging out with the other kids, any one thing, I'd figure I'd wasted it. Didn't get enough other stuff into the day. So I'd feel like I was bored, after an hour or so. Bop around between all the things there were to do. But now I'm not. I don't know how long we've been here. I don't know how long I'll want to stay. I'm not bored at all, because I don't need to tell myself I'm running out of time."

"I'm a little bored," confessed Aidan. "Sometimes."

"Oh - sorry. You know, we don't *have* to stay together all the time, if you'd rather - we could meet somewhere, maybe in a library where we can read while we wait, after a while wandering off doing our own thing, if you want -" She tried not to sound too desperate for company. Bored, no, but lonely. Lonely she could be.

"No - it's okay," he said, shaking his head. "I think being bored sometimes is good for me. I should learn how to sit with it. And I want to help you."

"If you say so," Ivy said. She applied herself to trying to figure out how synchronized swimmers moved. Little hand motions, she thought, mostly.

"I'm from Franklin," she said, eventually, into the quiet air above the two of them. Maybe he didn't especially want to know, maybe she'd only dreamed it, but what would it hurt, to tell him?

"Oh," Aidan murmured. "I've never been to Franklin before."

And then, quite unaccountably, he started to sob, and swam for the edge of the lake, leaving her behind.

It took Ivy a while to catch up with him. He was taller, with a longer stride, and he'd taught himself some parkour. But he was the only moving thing in the world, and she never tired, and while she sometimes wondered if he wanted her to leave him alone, she felt like she deserved to hear that in so many words, first, before this vanishingly rare opportunity was gone forever for both of them.

He stopped, eventually, up a water tower covered in a mural of a dragon and a wizard dueling one another. It was done partly in paint and partly in chalk with some outlines Ivy thought were Sharpie, and she tried not to smudge the vulnerable chalk parts on her way up, even though the next rain would certainly do it for her.

"Aidan?"

He shivered a little but didn't run off again. "I've never been to Franklin," he said. "I've never seen you before this - this moment. That we're in. Never."

"Did... you think you had?" Ivy said uncertainly.

"I don't know," he whispered. "I've - seen - a lot of people. I can't remember them all. It was longer ago for me than for any of them. There was no reason I wouldn't have seen you except if I'd never been near where you live."

Ivy sat down next to him on the water tower. Something still wasn't falling into place for her -

Oh.

She turned the idea over in her mind, wondering how to say it.

"I have a baby," she said at last. "At home."

Aidan's head snapped up. "I'm not - I *didn't*, I've never been to Franklin. - and it was only seven months back, real time, that I learned to pause -"

Ivy nodded. She felt strangely calm. Aidan had never touched her. Whatever else had happened, he'd had as long as he needed to grow out of it. "She doesn't look anything like you. She came out even darker than me. But you - might have some babies? On the way."

He didn't meet her eyes. "I didn't know that - people could get pregnant by somebody paused, but. Seems like I might." There were no abortion doctors left for a thousand miles around. Even if there had been not everyone would have availed themselves.

Aidan buried his face in his knees, wrapped his arms around his shins.

"You're older now," said Ivy. "You never touched me. You - you grew up, you've been - helping me - you're my friend." Her only friend. Her friends from school had all scattered to the winds, and it was

only Ivy who had nowhere else to go that seemed like it might be better or at least have more people to guard the door. He was her *only* friend. "Aidan?"

He was holding very still.

He was holding so, so perfectly still.

Ivy lingered a while longer in her meditation, though she had no way to be sure how long. It was still true, however lonely she got, that she was not old enough to be a mother, and that she needed to fit in as much living as she could before the end of the world, and grow to be as good to Willow as she could before it was all over.

But it was much harder to walk and walk and walk, with no one to talk to; to wander and find her way back to a landmark, alone; to circle back to her friend, her only friend in the world, and find him as still and stationary as anyone else. She couldn't even see his face, he was curled in on himself too tightly. No matter how many times she climbed the water tower he was still there, and he still would be, till she let time go on again.

And she couldn't do that up on the water tower, miles away from home.

She wrote him a letter - and then she took it back and ripped it up and wrote him another - and another - and finally by the time she'd written him a fourth draft, she couldn't think of a different way to say everything there was to say, so the fourth draft stayed, folded up and forced into his hand.

She wandered. She waited. She read and drew and sang and swam and built and slept and hiked until she was sick to death of it. And then she went home.

She wriggled her way back under Willow's sleeping form. Put her hand on Willow's still, small back.

And she let go.

Willow wasn't company in quite the same way as a friend who could hold a conversation, but she was company. Ivy felt almost as though Willow had been born all over again, entering Ivy's life after such a hiatus.

She didn't stop pausing. It was much too useful - when the electricity was out for days and she had to do the laundry by hand, when she wanted to sleep and Willow didn't, when the ration shipment was late and she wanted one solid meal to last her through all the things on her to-do list more energy-intensive than lying in bed and nursing. But she didn't stay long. She was ready to be a mother, and even if she cheated sometimes being a mother meant not living at twice the rate of her child. It meant not living in a world that Willow barely intersected.

Being in real time was vulnerable. At any moment someone could come upon her, frozen in place where she was stirring grits or blowing raspberries on Willow's tummy or cannibalizing an old shirt to patch one she liked more, and break into the house and do whatever they wanted. But she'd had all she could stand of the silent vast world of safety.

Nobody came to her house except the ration delivery. Or, if anyone came, they didn't leave a trace. She changed clothes in paused time. Took showers with Willow parked in a nest of towels on top of the edge of the shower curtain, so anyone who wanted to join her would have to cut it to move it aside, and then at least she'd know.

Being with Willow wasn't like being alone and it wasn't like being with another adult. She stuffed herself with all the baby snuggles she could stand and then some, and talked to Willow like Willow's

future self was a pen pal, receiving Ivy's messages in a bottle of memory, because there was no one else to talk to. It was overwhelming and desolate all at once.

She missed her mom. She missed her classmates. She missed never having to eat grits with no butter every day of the week. And she missed Aidan.

Maybe he hadn't even read her letter. Maybe he'd opened his hand and let it blow away and lived a thousand lifetimes meditating on moment upon moment upon moment, safe and silent and solitary.

Ivy tried not to dwell on it, but there wasn't a whole lot to do.

Aidan came the day Willow turned three months old.

When Ivy heard the knock on the door she paused without even thinking about it. It wasn't time for the ration delivery. She hadn't spotted motion out her window. But when she peeked through the peephole, there he was. Just as she remembered him. Maybe with his hair a little longer.

Why? Why now?

Willow was asleep. She was a light sleeper, waking and crying if there was a helicopter overhead or shouting outside or a clatter as Ivy knocked something over. She'd wake up from the knock as soon as time started again, and then Ivy would have to talk to Aidan around a crying baby. Why had he come at all?

He'd either knocked on every door in town or he'd peeped in the window, paused, watching a still-life of Ivy nursing Willow or stirring beans on the stove. Or he'd been by in just the last second, when Ivy had just been washing out a mason jar so she could make pickles the next time the rations had vegetables in.

She went back to the jar and dried it off and set it in the cupboard, thinking. She wanted to see him again, but she worried she'd just yell. Why had he dropped out of their moment, rather than face her - why now, when he could have had all the time he'd wanted to think and then some and found her house the same instant she'd reached it herself?

Finally she opened the door and let the moment go.

Aidan opened his mouth, and Willow whimpered, and Ivy held up a finger at him, *wait*, and went to collect her baby.

With Willow shushed back to sleep on her shoulder, Ivy returned to Aidan where he was still waiting awkwardly on her doorstep. "Yes?" she said in a low voice, so she wouldn't wake Willow up again.

"I -" he began, looking between Ivy and Willow with a strange, sad look. "I. Found a place to go. For you. And her."

"Where?" Ivy asked softly.

"It's this Mennonite offshoot. They have a - farm - thing, grow most of their own food, they're pretty out of the way and organized with keeping meditators out in mind, and if nobody's come after them yet it doesn't seem likely anyone will... they seem nice. I asked them and they said they'd take you."

Ivy blinked at him. Packing up and moving to a Mennonite farm would be risky, it would have to all be done in real time to bring Willow along. But it would be - people, safe people in a safe place, Willow having more people to talk to. Instead of just waiting for nothing. Waiting for the ration truck to miss a week, miss another week, miss too many weeks in a row.

The Mennonites might not last that long either. In a year, or ten, someone might find them and take all their food, even if they didn't

otherwise wish them any harm, hoping to feed some other band of people holding on somewhere.

In a year Willow would be able to walk. In ten, if she wanted, she'd be able to meditate.

Ivy opened her mouth on a *yes* - and then -

"What about you?"

"- what about me?" asked Aidan.

"Will they take you? Will they let you live there with them?"

"- I didn't ask."

"Aidan, where do you *live*?"

"I - nowhere in particular really, I wander around, you know." He wasn't looking at her, but his eyes flicked to Willow, asleep on Ivy's shoulder, a couple of times. "It's not important, I don't have a kid to take care of, I can always just go around if I run into a rainstorm or anything."

Ivy just looked at him. As though they were paused together again, had all the timelessness in the world, and she had nothing else to do but hold Willow and wait for a better answer, though the light breeze and the buzz of a fly and the baby's soft breaths in her ear belied the idea.

"I didn't ask about me," he said again, after a - not silence. After a quiet.

"Then," Ivy said, "go back and ask. And I'll start packing."

Aidan did not seem to understand.

"You're my friend," Ivy told him. "So you aren't Willow's father, not specifically. But if anybody on this Earth can forgive you anyway, it's me."

Aidan - flickered in place, like he'd paused and then come straight back after however many hours or years. "Ivy," he said.

"Go ask. Ask them if we can all three live there. And I'll get my things and Willow's together." Ivy smiled at him. "Or I guess you could tell me where it is and you could watch Willow while I talk to them, but..."

"I - I'll go," said Aidan, starting very slightly to smile back. "Back in a - a few minutes. - Ivy?"

"Mm?"

"Missed you."

"I missed you too. Don't you ever - don't disappear on me like that again," she replied. "Come back soon as you've talked to them. Bye."

And in a blink, he was gone.

Ivy, singing to sleepy Willow, started to drift around her house for the things worth bringing on a journey.

Guided

Abbot Dache greeted the visitors personally, this time. Usually one of the other monks handled tours, but today they were taking the juniors on a fundraising mission in the city. "Welcome to the Order of the Ever Guided," he said, bowing to the foreigners. "While you are here, please remember, no disruptive sounds or words, and please do not go anywhere unescorted, especially the nuns' side. May I have your names?"

They all recited their names, sort of on top of each other, but it was polite to ask. A Dennis, a Copeland, a few others less distinct. He did have a list to consult from the tour office that sent parties to the monastery. He might need to call one away from the koi pond or tell them not to touch a scroll, and it was always much better received if he had their names.

There were only five this time. Sometimes they'd get a whole busful, sometimes before the agency had squared things away a little better they'd get families or couples who chafed at the gender segregation, sometimes insisting on getting back on the bus and sitting there for the full hour and a half. Though once Dache had put a little boy on his shoulders and shown him the men's half and returned him to his mother none the worse for wear. This batch was five men who'd come in a van driven by a local, who was now reading a magazine in the driver's seat and smoking a cigarette. Dache glanced away, uncomfortable with displays of vice, and re-focused on his group. "This way," he said, "you will see our entrance hall. In winter and summer, when the weather can be dangerous, anyone can shelter here until there is a way for them to safely make their way home. At other times it is used for any necessary meetings between men and women that do not instead take place in the gardens or dining hall. The door on the north side leads to the women's half, please don't try to enter that or any other apertures between the halves."

"Why do the Ever Guided practice gender segregation?" asked one of the guests. "It doesn't seem like it'd be necessary."

"It isn't necessary," said Dache. "It's also not necessary to do calligraphy, or to pray out loud instead of attaching a prayer wheel to a bicycle and taking up a delivery route. It's just part of our way of life."

"I thought," said a second guest, "that it was so the nuns wouldn't get pregnant."

"Perhaps in other denominations that's the rationale," agreed Dache. He went through the spiel about all the features of the hall. This decoration installed by that abbot, this one a memorial for thus and such an event, this one a donated commission from some Emperor who'd once sought the Ever Guided for advice. Dache didn't really pay attention to the words as they came out of his mouth; he had everything memorized perfectly and wasn't going to misstep. He watched the tourists, instead, their eyes now tracking his gestures at the light fixtures. "We were wired for electricity only twenty-two years ago -"

"Why did you get electricity?" one man asked.

"We learned that heating the monastery with our previous methods was harming our lungs," said Dache. "We aren't prohibited or even specially cautioned against new technology. We just need a reason, and that was one of them. We do sometimes light candles for more ceremonial occasions but the electric lighting is suitable for everyday."

They moved on; up the stairs, across the gallery, down into the courtyard - skipping over the dormitories beneath that let out directly into that yard. There were some nuns, on their side of the low cobblestone wall, performing katas; the younger ones were slower, but no less perfect than their seniors.

"They're so graceful," sighed a tourist. He'd called himself Dennis.

"That's the point, isn't it? Of the whole Ever Guided thing?" said another. Dache thought he'd introduced himself as Copeland. "They do something to the babies they take in so they can't do a form wrong."

"Huh?" said the one who'd remarked on the beauty of the forms.

"That's what Ever Guided means, this isn't like a random Theravada temple or whatever," said Copeland. "They have an artifact or something that - well, presumably the abbot can tell us, I assume it's on the tour?"

The artifact was not generally shown to tourists but Dache was in fact equipped to explain. "In order to live in accordance with the principles of the Ever Guided it is important that every adherent in our monastery be protected from error by our Guide. The Guide, once applied to a new entrant, is able to detect when they depart from the expected forms and strictures, and respond with proportional discomfort."

"You mean it hurts them?" said Dennis. "The babies? If they can't do a sun salutation or whatever that is just right?"

"It hurts babies if they cannot walk correctly," said Dache. "They trip and fall. But they're resilient, and they are motivated to learn the skills they will need, so they try again and soon learn to walk without falling. The Guide emphasizes more skills, but in the same basic way."

Dennis didn't look convinced. "That seems kind of extreme just to get them doing yoga just so! Downright child-abusey!"

Dache decided not to correct him about whether the Ever Guided practiced "yoga"; Westerners usually guessed either that or tai chi. "A Guided child does not only do these exercises just so," he said.

"They also abide by all of our other rules as second nature, without it being particularly tempting for them to fail. We do not have scandals, we do not have a criminal element, we do not have institutional abuses, because those things cannot tempt us. We do not consider it child abuse; all of us were raised the same way and seldom feel the Guide after early childhood."

"How does it work? People do things that hurt them all the time," Copeland remarked. "They drink enough to get a hangover, say, or they say mean things to their friends and alienate people."

"That's not the correct kind of pain to envision when thinking about the Guide," said Dache. "When was the last time you bit your tongue?"

"Last week," said one of the quieter tourists. "I bumped my head and chomped it but good."

"But it's not something you do every day, nor something that you'd think of as tempting, even though your tongue is always in your mouth, even if you are the kind of person who chews on pens and pencils. Little children don't bite their tongues much either, and when they do it's an accident of the sort you described, a bump on the head or a fumble with a bite of food. But little children born without the ability to feel pain at all - those do bite their tongues. They lack the thing that taught every one of you not to harm yourself in this constantly available way. Their knowledge that it will damage them is not enough. Even knowledge that it will cause them displeasure of some kind, but later, not right away, is not enough to stop those children from scratching at their own eyes till they go blind, or failing to monitor their temperature until they die of heatstroke."

"Heatstroke?" muttered Dennis.

"A lot of the people who are born without pain also can't sweat for some reason," Copeland muttered back. "Abbot, what makes the

Ever Guided thing work? It isn't just stopping you from biting your tongue."

"Pain - not just any pain, but instant, passionless, reliable pain that strikes every time without fail, not a punishment from a parent, not a far-flung probability, not something you've simply been told about - is a truly reliable teacher. An Ever Guided dedicate probably experiences less pain than a typical layperson. Bad posture hurts you - just not right away - but we never develop it; it would never seem easier to us, because it would begin to hurt as soon as we began. Not exercising, or eating too much, or sleeping too little or too irregularly, or drinking alcohol, all hurt you - but not right away - but we don't have any of those problems. We are healthy and we are safe from ourselves and each other, enjoying a trust few people can. The Guide is not a torturer, it is our own better selves reminding us what is in our own interests."

"Your own interests as defined by the monks who founded this place - how long ago?"

"One thousand seven hundred and fourteen years," said Dache. "But we can update the strictures of the Guide, with a sufficiently thorough understanding of what we are replacing and what is to take its place. We are not suffering for lack of laundry to do by hand, or for having no water to draw; we're not even sticking with techniques in our martial tradition that have not been updated in centuries."

They exited the courtyard, finally - they were slightly behind schedule, and Dache talked fast as they passed through the men's side of the dining area, skipping his usual joke about the hard backless benches where they sat when they ate. They circled through the monastery library, with its revolving compartment in the middle to pass books between the male and female librarians; Dache nodded to the one on this side, and mentally greeted the one on the other side, his friend Rinchen, though he couldn't talk to her except

outdoors and at meals. The next stop was an incense-choked chamber where prayers were said twenty-four hours a day by a rotation of monks.

"I thought you had to get plenty of sleep?" said Dennis of the schedule, speaking low to avoid talking over the praying monk, who ignored them.

"We do. Some of us take our sleeping hours at different times to complete night prayer duties," Dache replied. "The Guide is not completely inflexible. It can acknowledge a superior's suggestion that you take a day off to rest an injury, or isolate in your room to avoid spreading an illness, or even to leave the monastery entirely and seek medical attention, and in those situations it will permit rest when normally it would urge work; if someone does not seem to be doing well on our schedule, they can change it, with my or the abbess's permission depending on which side they're on."

"How young does somebody have to be to get Guided?" asked Copeland.

"We take initiates only between the ages of six months and one year," Dache told him. "Younger and they require breastfeeding -"

"Or formula," piped up a tourist.

"It's not common in this area, which is where most of our initiates come from," said Dache, "but in principle we could take a younger infant and give them formula, yes, it's just not what we've done in the past. After one year I cannot be certain the Guide would not work, but we have not risked it, except in cases where we were genuinely unsure if the child was past their birthday. I do not think it would work on children of, say, three years old, who were already accustomed to walking without falling, chewing without biting their tongues, and in general learning things solely in painless and cognitive ways - it would seem to strike them at random, I think, and they would not have the right attitude of curiosity to learn what

it did and did not require, nor to take the advice of their seniors in the right spirit."

"What is the right spirit?" Dennis wondered.

"Imagine teaching a toddler to walk. You show him how, exaggerating a little; it is understood between you that you are not making him fall, and that the laws of physics are not a cruel prank played on him in particular, but the technique will help him spend less time on the ground. Babies naturally adapt very well to the Guide in this frame of mind. I think an older child would tend to feel more imposed upon. But I have not spent much time around children of any age who were not Guided, so this is only speculation, and of course the fact that we probably do it this way for a sound reason even if all the experiments were long ago." They had arrived at the area where the little boys lived with their caretakers; monks were changing diapers and bouncing young boys on their shoulders and playing peekaboo. Hopefully it would be clear to Dennis and the other tourists that this was not a hive of child abuse even if the children weren't free to slouch now on credit and collect back pain as adults.

Some of the kids waved at the tour group, and the older ones bowed, then posed for pictures. The tourists took snapshots of the cuter boys, grinning as they balanced on one foot or hoisted each other into the air or dangled giggling babies by their ankles.

"So none of them remember the procedure, whatever it is?" asked Copeland, as they continued through to the back garden where the monastery grew its own vegetables and herbs and kept ducks.

"It's hard to say what a one-year-old remembers, but certainly by a bit later on they do not," confirmed Dache.

"What *is* the procedure, then?" Copeland inquired.

"I'm afraid that's not something we discuss with outsiders," Dache apologized, "but to answer the most frequently asked followup question, it doesn't hurt in and of itself."

The tour ended not long after, once Dache had recited the requisite history about the buildings on the grounds apart from the main monastery - the old bathhouse, the garden shed, the granary they used to store emergency food supplies in, the dovecote. The mausoleum, with monks and nuns, no longer separated, laid to rest as self-mummified remains or as more conventional skeletons following a sky burial. Dache escorted them back out to the dirt road that led up the mountain, where their van was waiting.

"Oh, hang on," said Copeland, patting his pockets, "I've dropped something -" And he ran back in to the monastery, without even waiting for Dache.

"I charge by the minute," the van driver told the remaining tourists.

"He'll be back in a minute, probably," said Dennis, sounding uncertain. "We can ditch him if he's not and he can walk, it's probably not that bad downhill."

Dache followed Copeland in at a swift walk. "Copeland?" he called. Was that a surname or a forename, in English? Or one of those names that could be either? "Copeland, where have you gotten to -"

There was no response. Dache followed the tour route, eyes searching, feet ceaseless. If he was just rummaging among the cabbages for his passport that wasn't a terrible problem but if he was crossing to the nuns' side, as visitors occasionally attempted, Dache was fully intending to break his arm in response. The only nun who was still in the courtyard, sweeping the paths in the fading light, shook her head when Dache asked if she'd seen Copeland go by.

That meant that he'd gone through the gallery into the back half of the monastery without stopping at the courtyard; Dache sped up a little, but it wasn't yet enough of an emergency that he broke into a flat run. Was Copeland in the library? That wasn't tried as often, but occasionally someone would take it into their head to try to steal a rare book, or -

Dache did not see Copeland in the library, but he could hear something odd, sounding almost as though a squirrel had gotten into the book-compartment that turned between the library sections, and Dache's whole body clenched with anxiety. He marched over to the compartment and looked up.

There, in the space above the platform where books were placed, rested the Guiding Sutra, bound in silk to protect its fragile pages, surrounded with camphor to keep away pests.

There *had* rested the Guiding Sutra. But Copeland now had the Guide in his hands - he was a small man, perched on top of the whole revolving door setup inside the cavity between the walls.

"Put it down, Copeland," said Dache in a low, level voice.

"It's criminal to be holding something like this in a monastery up a mountain," Copeland said. "It could change the world."

"We believe that our ways can -"

"Not change the world *through prayer*," said Copeland scornfully. "Change the world by *changing it*. You could have children the world over standing up straight and attending school and saying no to drugs. You could have everyone, everyone in the world, be peaceful prayerful hardworking sorts who aren't even tempted to -"

"- steal sacred artifacts?" interrupted Dache. The revolving door space was too small, but perhaps if he spun it Copeland would fall - but he couldn't risk the Sutra -

"For instance," said Copeland lightly. "I can't be the only person who's tried to grab it."

"Typically they try at night."

"Well, I'd been going to, but you let on you have twenty-four-hour prayer rotations. Seemed I'd better go with plan B."

"You've been *caught*, Copeland."

Copeland removed the beard from - her face. Dache stepped back, instinctively -

"Marissa Copeland at your service. Would you indulge me with a ' *if* that's even your real name'? - no? Pity." She jumped down, sutra clutched to her chest, and Dache stepped back again.

"Come on," she said. "It's the key to ending war and crime and domestic abuse. It's the golden bullet of public health. It's too important to leave here just because you've had it for a long time."

Dache couldn't touch her -

"BHANTE RINCHEN," Dache hollered at the top of his lungs, "AS ABBOT I AUTHORIZE YOU -"

The book compartment spun as Rinchen launched herself through it, rolled along the carpet, and came up with a hard strike to Copeland's jaw. Copeland went down, and Rinchen caught the sutra. She handed it to Dache and took off her shawl and put it under Copeland's head, so that the blood now drooling from her lips wouldn't stain the library rug.

"How much did you hear?" Dache asked, tense as though on a tightrope, half-expecting Copeland to sit up and seize him and send a terrible burn through his nerves - the sutra did not care if you bit your tongue by accident or not, it was a passionless, exceptionless

law - Dache *had* no superior, any more, to tell him that this one time it would be all right. If he ever could not complete his duties, ever needed a break from any of their rules to live, he would simply die, mummifying himself rather than suffering the indignity of a slow decline.

"Enough," said Rinchen. "You move the Sutra, I'll haul her out to their van."

"If they haven't left yet," Dache said.

"I'll hurry." Rinchen was sixty-five, the same as Dache, but she was Ever Guided and still spry. She hauled Copeland onto her shoulders and ran. Her authorization to be in the men's side would last until he revoked it or she left of her own accord.

The Sutra had several hiding places. People had attempted to steal it before, and it wasn't ideal to keep it in the same place at all times. Copeland's deduction about where it would likely be made sense - it had to be somewhere both the monks and the nuns could access it, and protected from the elements, and possibly she'd even smelled the camphor. But Dache carried it reverently to the entrance hall, instead, made sure he was completely alone, and opened the secret passage to the cellar, where they stored the cleaning supplies and the tools for maintaining the building, and placed it under a heavy floor panel there. Less convenient, but they weren't expecting any new orphans to be brought to the monastery any time soon. And not a stop on the tour, so if Copeland tried again under a new disguise, or sent an agent, they wouldn't have any useful clues.

The key to ending war and crime and domestic abuse. The golden bullet of public health. The ever-present force shaping Dache's life, the lives of everyone he knew, without which he couldn't imagine his existence at all. The securer of his whole world.

The reason that after his teacher had died, when Dache was eight years old, and he had been sobbing in the blackberry patch with

Rinchen, she couldn't give him a hug without both of them flinching back, as though from a hot coal.

They knew how to update the katas for the exercises. They knew how to remove the candle-lighting and the laundry-scrubbing duties, replaced with changing lightbulbs and running washing machines. They knew how to update their dietary laws to account for the Columbian exchange, and add new texts to their studies and new prayers to their litanies. They didn't know how to change *everything*

And Copeland didn't know even as much as they did. She wouldn't have figured out how to make her perfect world. She could only make it in halves.

Rinchen appeared in the entrance hall again as Dache came up the stairs, and they bowed to each other, perfectly straightbacked, and went their separate ways.

Frost

"Hey, jerkface, I need a signature," I yelled into the upstairs.

"Why, Michelle," said the jerkface in question from behind me. I didn't even jump, I was used to him doing that. "I thought you'd grown beyond such transparent schemes. If I could be tricked that easily, I -"

"I don't need you to write your literal actual real truuuuuuuuue name," I snapped. "I need you to write 'Jennifer Schultz' on my field trip form, and then agree that you wrote it if anyone asks. But if that's too much trouble for your exalted baronial self -"

"Ducal, Michelle!" he hissed, kind of getting in my face, but I was used to that too. Riling him up was very cheap entertainment. He wasn't going to actually touch me, I'd figured that out pretty quick.

"Your exalted royal self -"

"Ducal! I don't trespass on the Queen's titles -"

"If you don't want to write 'Jennifer Schultz' on my form," I said, "then you could go ahead and give me the real live Jennifer Schultz! I think this would save you a lot of trouble going forward! I mean, imagine all the seconds you'd shave off from saying my name in every sentence like you think that's intimidating to a human. Think of the leaves you wouldn't have to turn into money for my groceries. You could spend hours upon hours chasing deer or whatever it is you do when you're not pretending to be my mom."

"Michelle," he said, "my charge is as it must be, and you will not get out of it by appealing to lost time. Unlike you, I will have as many

hours as I could possibly wish to hunt stags, to weave gossamer from sunbeams... Michelle, really."

"So sign the form, jerkface."

He signed it. Well, wrote 'Jennifer Schultz' on it. I obviously have no idea what his name is. He doesn't even give me a nickname to call him, not that I'd be very likely to use it if he introduced himself as Gossamerweave Staghunter or whatever, so I just say 'jerkface'. I do this all the time, including to my teacher. Handing in the form and saying, loud enough for the whole class to hear, "Hey, Miss Simpson, jerkface signed my form for me!" will get me a warning to pipe down and absolutely nothing about how to address my supposed mother. Nobody ever notices anything is weird about how this kind of anime-looking but obviously male Fair Folk guy is posing as her, up to and including from my behavior. I'm glad it works that way, since obviously I'm not going to call him Mom.

I did try to save her. I tried really hard. It's just that all of the ice sculptures looked like... ice sculptures. Not even sculptures of people. There were birds, feather-perfect, and snowflakes, and rabbits, and flowers down to the veins on the petals, and jewels, and they looked like ice sculptures, and I didn't know which one was her.

She hasn't melted, I know that. It's always winter in that valley. But I only got one guess.

"Jerkface, we're out of milk," I yelled, when I poked my head into the fridge. "Give me grocery money. Like a hundred dollars of it." He eats, I think, but I don't see him doing it and I don't think it's the same stuff I eat. I had to learn to cook, after I spent a couple of weeks eating frosting out of the can and stuff like that. It's not like he cares. I can do most of Mom's recipes okay now, except I think she must have had a secret ingredient or something that she didn't write down, in the macaroni casserole. Maybe she was hiding

vegetables in it all along and didn't want me to fish out the index card and discover it. I eat salad now. On purpose. But I put a lot of ranch on it.

When I pulled out of the fridge with a string cheese in my hand there was a pile of fives on the kitchen table. He always does fives. I think it's possible he pays the mortgage entirely in fives, which he rakes up off the lawn. I have seen him raking the neighbors' lawns, and then refusing to be paid, and taking their leaves, when there weren't enough here. That seems to be the only way he has of getting money. I couldn't tell you what anyone at Mom's old job thinks happened to her. He's definitely not showing up to the dialysis clinic every day. But they haven't come looking for her at home and I haven't tried picking up the phone and going "hi, is Jennifer there, this is her daughter Michelle" like I was supposed to do if I had some kind of emergency during work hours. Maybe I should sometime if I ever feel like I need a good cry or whatever.

I gathered up the pile of bills and got out my bike. It has one of those milk crate baskets, and that plus sometimes hanging stuff off my handlebars means I can carry enough for one person who mostly eats school lunch to last a week. Peanut butter, grape jelly, bread, carton of milk, bag of salad, frozen chicken nuggets, eggs, macaroni casserole ingredients, broccoli soup ingredients, ranch whenever I'm low on it, cake mix if I'm out or can't remember whether or not I'm out. Sometimes I get ice cream or chips but I can get those at the school vending machine. (It doesn't take fives, and I have to get change from somebody every time, but still, it feels silly to get a half a gallon of chocolate chip cookie dough to save money when the money is leaves.) I have no idea what the jerkface would have done if I'd been, like, six, and couldn't figure out how to shop for myself. If I'd been a baby and had needed bottle-feeding, even, what in the world does a Fair Folk do with that. I guess maybe a baby wouldn't have been in that situation, but a kindergartener could have been.

I loaded up my basket and bought the food. I usually use the self checkout just because it's there and I kind of don't like how nobody ever asks why I have so many five dollar bills, nobody asks why I'm shopping by myself, nobody asks if my mom said it would be okay to get five tubs of funfetti frosting. It's easier to just avoid them and pretend they would've asked if I'd talked to anybody.

The bike ride isn't that long. Sometimes I even walk, if I need to go in the middle of the week because I want to get something unusual and won't have that much to haul. I got home about half an hour after I left and put the change in my piggy bank that I still have even though I'm too old for it at this point, and put away all the groceries. He doesn't care if I just leave them on the table but you can't do that with milk and then I might as well get everything put into the pantry like things are normal. Sort of like using the self-checkout. If I have a friend over they aren't going to notice that my mom hasn't been putting the groceries away and vacuuming the carpet and making me take out the trash and that was thrilling for a period of about four days, after I was through all the stages of grief and before I was really aware of how far the creepy not being noticed thing spread. It spreads really far. I think I could probably assassinate the President while yelling at the top of my lungs "this is a test of the mind control the Fair Folk jerkface that replaced my mom uses to make sure nobody notices he did that!" and the cause of death would be listed as a heart attack.

So I do all the chores, and I take care of myself, and I eat salad, and I call the jerkface a jerkface because I'm not going to call him Mom but I don't try anymore to get people to notice. I did for a bit. I'd turn to the person next to me in the middle of English class, while the teacher was talking, and say "It's funny that we should be reading Bridge to Terabithia, because did you know that I in fact actually in real life no fooling went through a magical portal to a fantasy realm, where the Fair Folk stole my mother, I think because she ate something of theirs possibly but I'm not sure, and then they replaced her, but you have been enchanted not to notice". Or, well,

usually I wouldn't be that elaborate about it. But I'd say stuff that was sort of like that. And they'd look at me like I asked what page we were on, except for not telling me what page we were on. It's never anything very specific like that that gets filled in. They just assume I said something normal.

After the groceries I got the jerkface to cough up another pile of money and went out again to get new socks since my old ones were getting kind of dingy even when I followed all the instructions on the laundry detergent box. One thing I did back in the frosting eating stage of grief was I got him to give me a lot, like a whole lot, of leaves. I think it was like five thousand dollars, so a thousand fives. And then I bought clothes, fancy ones, all the ones Mom wouldn't have been able to afford for me, and would have said were stupid, and just a silly game that would seem dumb when I was older. I looked like a million bucks. Or maybe just like five thousand bucks. But I went to school dressed like a popular kid. They did actually notice that. They didn't wonder why my mom suddenly went on a shopping spree, or anything, but they noticed I was dressed up. It just didn't do anything. I didn't know what to do next after showing up like that. I wound up returning everything and getting normal stuff and every time somebody made a comment about it I'd tell them that it was the jerkface's fault like everything else, even though it's not like he forced five thousand leaf dollars into my hands and told me I had to buy one of everything at American Eagle.

Look, you do a lot of weird things during the frosting eating stage of grief. I painted my room. I actually did okay at that, I put sheets over the furniture first and everything and it looks kind of cool and very purple now. I tried to adopt a dog, but they wanted my mom to physically come along with me to the shelter and sign things, and the jerkface wouldn't do it, so I did not manage to actually adopt one, but I pet-sat for somebody the next time there was a chance to, like she wouldn't have let me do. I slept late and skipped school sometimes and told them to call my mom when they asked me

where I'd been. I didn't brush my teeth for a while and that turned out to be a very bad combination with the frosting thing and I had to have like ten fillings the next time I went to the dentist. I watched a lot of TV. There was just... so so much frosting.

I did try to find her. The Fair Folk said that it would be easy if I let my love for her guide me. They said that they'd transformed her into a statue of ice, and that since I hadn't trespassed of my own will, I should suffer no loss for the crime, and all I had to do was prove that I loved her.

It's just that I didn't.

I miss her. I was used to her. The jerkface is awful and I hope he falls down stairs made of salt. (I've tried putting salt places. It doesn't work but he does react to it at all and start declaiming about how he isn't going to fall to so puny an assault, so I think maybe it would do something if there were a lot more of it or you stabbed him with it or something.) But if I'd loved her I probably would've been able to guess which flower or bird or snowflake was her. If she'd been more of a person to me than a box of recipe cards and the fact of living in a house where the mortgage got paid every month.

I bought a bunch of socks. It was almost winter, in the mortal world, where seasons aren't a municipal-level convention, and it was going to get chilly enough through my badly insulated bedroom window that I'd want to grab socks out of a heap right next to the bed before I poked any farther out of the covers than I had to. Nice big pile of warm wooly socks. In Christmasy colors, because why not, if anyone made fun of me all I would have to say is "a Fair Folk is impersonating my mother because it turned out all she was to me at the time was a roof over my head and I still have that, so they think this was okay, for some reason" and then everything will seem totally, super normal. Exactly what you expect somebody to say and

definitely on-topic and not remarkable at all and not to be followed with further inquiries about my festive Christmasy socks.

I got home with my pile of Christmasy socks and took off all their wrappings and put them in their heap. Actually in a basket because I found the basket Mom used to keep her yarn stash in before she gave up knitting since she never had the energy. But they were in a heap within the basket. Then I did some of my homework. Spouting off about my mom won't keep somebody from giving me bad grades, and I'm not actually sure what would happen if I flunked, so I do enough of it to pass and if I'm really crunched I tell the jerkface that my mom would've helped me. She did that about twice but it was enough to get him to magic something done once in a while.

I had nuggets for dinner, and salad, both with a lot of ranch on them, and decided not to bother to bake a cake, or even to eat frosting out of the can. I put all the dishes in the dishwasher. I wandered around through the house in case the jerkface was asleep somewhere and I could pour salt on his face. I've caught him like that a couple times, but this time, like most times, there was no evidence he was anywhere in the house, or raking. I don't know where he goes. I don't know if he is strictly required to be anywhere at all points in time. Maybe part of being immortal is getting to skip parts because you'll still have infinity time no matter how much you do it.

Once I'd made sure he wasn't lurking somewhere like a total creeper, except in the sense that if I said "hey jerkface" he'd materialize, I put myself to bed.

Sometimes I have nightmares. Sometimes the nightmares are about the cold in the ice sculpture gallery. It was freezing, and I wasn't dressed for it. I had sandals on, when it happened, and long sleeves but not very thick ones. I asked the Fair Folk who was watching me search through the statues if Mom's clothes were somewhere, so that I could put them on over what I was wearing, but they'd

changed with her. It was so cold. I kept wanting to fall asleep, but I was pretty sure at the time that would have killed me. Now I think I ought to have tried it - they didn't let me lose any toes, I don't think they would have let me die - but I didn't know, then, I was just focused on finding Mom. I looked at every single sculpture. There were about forty of them - I counted but I've forgotten, now, how many, just that it was forty something. I looked at them all over and over and over while my fingers turned blue and I stopped being able to feel my ears and I tried and tried to love her and I didn't know how.

I think I could do it now. I think if you put me back in that sculpture gallery, now after all of this, it wouldn't matter if I was in my underwear, I'd be able to think of enough stuff from when she was around to manage it. I would remember her making broccoli soup, and remember her getting me books on Christmas, and remember her driving me to the doctor's office to get my broken arm wrapped up, and remember her telling me how to call the clinic and ask for her if I ever needed her in spite of the fact that I had never needed her and kind of still didn't.

So, the second kind of nightmare I have is about doing that.

I think maybe the jerkface would let me try. I think maybe he'd bring me back to the winter place, maybe on the anniversary of when it happened or something. I think it sort of fits with how he works, with how all the Fair Folk work. And in the second kind of nightmare, I do. I go and I love her as much as I can and it's enough and I go up to the statue that she was turned into and hug it or something, and it melts and it's my mom, back again and okay.

And then in the dream, it doesn't usually go into much detail past that point, but I know, like you do in dreams, that everything is going to get worse. We're going to have to eat rice and beans for months while she gets a job again. She's going to have to call up every single member of our family, ones I haven't talked to in ages

because her phone was turned into ice with her clothes and I don't have their numbers and they haven't noticed anything's wrong. She's going to have to catch up on who's President now and figure out how to get into her bank account and her email. She's going to go to therapy, as soon as she has the money to spare for it, hours and hours of therapy, and she'll make me go too, and finally someone will hear me when I say bizarre things, and it will hurt, and I won't even be able to eat frosting about it because Mom doesn't let me do that.

The only thing worse than coming home to a jerkface would be that.

One of these days I'll probably ask him. I'll find a way that'll appeal to his stupid Fair Folk sensibilities, like, "I challenge you double or nothing to a rematch, for the life of my beloved mother", and I'll carry a picture of her against my heart even if I have to buy a shirt with a breast pocket specifically for that, and I'll go wearing a furry parka but I'll fling it off my shoulders before I even walk in among the ice sculptures to prove that I won't need hours, this time, won't be trying to figure out if Fair Folk will kill me for peeing in their statue gallery (they didn't, obviously), won't be stopping every few minutes to bring my feet up to my face and breathe on them till they hurt again.

But it might take a while, like until I'm in college. I can probably get him to pay for college first, all four years entirely in fives, and then we won't be squeezed together while she's figuring everything out again.

And if she asks me what took so long, I will be in another state, and I can say "bad connection, sorry, same time next week?" and eat as much frosting as I have to.

Zusan

When Chudara took over, they installed a county governor. He ruled over every village Zusan had ever heard of, and then some. He had a house built for him and his household in the foothills overlooking Quan, where she lived, and when the house was built, he announced that he meant to take a local wife.

Zusan had seen Chudaran men seldom, in the past. Mostly soldiers, and those only peeking through the neighbor's shutters. When there was fighting near Quan, sometimes one army, or the other, would come through and ransack the village for provisions, kicking half the families into the homes of the other half so they could sleep in their houses, and leave the next morning, all chaos. The Chudaran men were darker, and cut their hair short, and of course spoke only Chudaran, communicating their demands with gestures.

But other than that, they weren't much different from the emperor's army. The emperor's army was made up of men who could have been Zusan's older brother, himself a soldier, but his division never passed through Quan. He was a real archer, snapped up by the army for his telltale ability to hit a bird in flight with a thrown stone, and they kept the archers in action. There was no sparing someone who could place an arrow like her brother could. When the war ended, the money stopped, and when he still didn't come home she thought probably he was dead.

Regardless of who won, the people of Quan, Zusan included, were glad the war was over. Some of them grumbled, of course. The governor's house up in their hills was both good and bad: good, because it would soon be easy to get all kinds of things he'd have brought to his home, and he would have to hire locals for servants sooner or later, and this would make all the families of Quan richer. Bad, because with the governor right there, they would have a lot of

trouble holding back anything he wanted to tax without being noticed, and if he were a bad governor, it would go badly for them to be right under his eye. Not just his eye, even; everyone knew that Chudarans could sometimes read minds.

Most everyone felt it was encouraging that he did not mean to install a wife from Chudara. Zusan heard people gossiping - this means he wishes to rule gently, they said, this means he will learn our ways before he lays down Chudaran laws.

He had some requirements for his wife. He wanted a girl old enough to bear children, but not older than himself at twenty-two winters. He wanted her fresh, not a widow or one with a baby pretending to be her little brother mixed into the jumble of her family. He wanted her pretty - actually, the rumors Zusan heard suggested that, if you spoke Chudaran, he'd meant something like "not disfigured", but everyone assumed that he meant pretty. He wanted her not already promised to some boy, presumably so the boy would not try to assassinate him for the slight.

Now, there were plenty of pretty young girls, but most of them *were* promised. Most particularly the pretty ones were. Elders noticed which little cousins played nicely together, threw them into pairs whenever circumstance permitted to confirm their amiability, and formally sewed things up by the time they had thirty winters between them. The occasional alliance between families was usually even more premeditated. Zusan's mother, in the general sense if not as an individual, had been intended for Zusan's father before either of them were born.

Zusan herself was the only girl born to her parents. Their match was a great success, yielding eight living sons including an archer, and just the one girl. The seven brothers who hadn't been snapped up by the army to pincushion the enemy were all paired off with girl-cousins already, of whom Zusan had many.

Actually, there were very few boy-cousins her age in her family, and those were all promised to better-suited girls. It had seemed likely as not that she'd step into the place of an older relative when someone died giving birth or caught the flu, but all the likeliest someones had been rather fortunate in recent years.

All of which meant that when the governor announced that whichever family produced his bride would be exempt from taxes for as long as she lived, her family put her in the family's finery and packed her off.

Zusan did not want to be an aging spinster, waiting for the death of an auntie who'd brushed her hair and teased her and snuck her sweets, so she could marry the poor woman's husband. But, as alternatives went, this was intimidating. She walked with a brother along to chaperone, up the hill, and he presented her, asserted that she was unattached and as young as she looked and hiding no hideous malformation.

The governor from Chudara did not really speak Quan's dialect, nor the city tongue that traders and travelers spoke. When he came to have a look at her he uttered just a couple of words, so thick with accent that she had to guess from context that he meant "thank you, welcome" and not "a green cow dances". When he pointed at himself and said "Siandar", Zusan presumed that was his name. She made her prettiest bow, pointed at herself, and said, "Zusan," in return. Properly it would have been Nian Zusan but she didn't want him to call her Nian, like he was a stranger from the next village who recognized her only as specifically as which house she lived in. Either he'd marry her, in which case he'd have the right to her personal name, or he wouldn't, and they would never speak again.

He didn't seem to know how to signal to her that she'd bowed for long enough. That, or he thought a county governor warranted as much backache as a king. When he started to reach for her as though to tip up her chin she straightened of her own accord and his

hand fell. "Zusan," he repeated carefully, as she looked him in the eye.

She nodded. "Yes, my lord." Probably he knew those words. They were what she'd prioritize if she were a governor.

Siandar looked her over, assessing. Looked over at one of the men in his livery and said something in Chudaran. The man said to Zusan's brother in his choking accent, "His lordship accepts. They will be married before the gods of Chudara. Please give me the name of the family."

"Nian," said Zusan's brother, and he accepted the papers that exempted her family from taxation as long as she lived.

Zusan hugged her brother goodbye, and he told her that he could see her new home from his window, it wasn't so far after all. And down he went.

"Zusan," said Siandar, and he held out his hand.

Zusan placed her palm in his.

In Quan, a wedding was done in the family's ancestral chapel, but while Siandar probably had ancestors, they were not in attendance. Instead his house had a roomful of little statues, some the size of Zusan's thumb lined up on shelves, some nearly as tall as she was, made of stone or wood or metal. One looked like it was solid gold, though it was a smaller one. The servant who spoke city tongue explained to her that the figurines were gods, those favored by his lordship's line - which implied that these dozens weren't even all of them. Zusan, in fairness, had more ancestors than Siandar had gods, but at least all of her ancestors had had two arms, two legs, zero tails, and completely human heads. Though perhaps the queer features helped him tell them apart.

A different servant was called in to perform a ceremony, entirely in Chudaran. Zusan studied her husband-to-be while the words washed over her. He wore blue, embroidered in more blue, trimmed in gold. It must have taken someone a year to make - someone *skilled*. And he hadn't even known someone would come bringing him a wife today! Zusan's family could have dithered for a week. He could have rejected her. It had to be that he dressed like this all the time. He must put an apron on just to eat his breakfast, and sleep naked to avoid rumpling it -

Zusan's thoughts skipped like a lost heartbeat for a moment before she caught up with the relevance of his possible tendency to sleep naked. He might sleep naked *next to her*, as soon as *that night*, and most likely only after he benefitted from having married her. Perhaps if she had known since she was eight that she was going to marry her second cousin once removed when they were both grown she would have gotten used to the idea gently. As it was she would have to accustom herself very *fast*. She had looked at the swirls sewn into his exotic outfit enough - it was blue and gold, fine - she looked at the rest of him, attempted to rehearse her best guess of events to follow in her head so she would not be caught too much by surprise.

Siandar started kissing the various gods after what felt like an hour of ritual had gone by, and gestured for her to do the same - she wasn't sure, at first, that this was what he meant, but when she leaned toward the first one he smiled and waved encouragingly. And so she planted her lips on the little ones in gold and jade and amethyst, and the medium-sized ones in quartz and marble and iron, and the big ones made of wood, just like he did, till every god had been visited. The celebrant droned on. Zusan's lips were chilly from the cold smooth sculptures, but soon - or not soon, she did not know how long Chudaran weddings took -

Not too much longer, it turned out, and then he did kiss her, cupping her face in his hands and waiting for her to look up at him before he

leaned in to close the distance. Zusan was not sure what she had been expecting. In hindsight of course if a person put his lips on her lips it would feel just like so: what, had she thought he would be some inhuman temperature? Be made of wood, like the god-statues? That he would bite? No.

He took her hand and tugged her out of the room of gods. The celebrant bowed, a tassel on his hat bobbing, and departed. The translator followed, but Siandar waved him away before they went through any doors, and then they were alone. Siandar found the room he wanted, and pulled it open.

It was, Zusan concluded immediately, his bedroom. She had a moment to look around - the bed itself was bigger than the one she shared with her favorite cousin at home, and there were two fireplaces, both empty at the moment in the summer warmth but ready to keep even such a large space toasty when winter came. There were more doors, implying a whole suite sectioned off here for him, separate from the god-room and the receiving hall and the servants' quarters and the places he'd do his governing and entertaining and dining. She hadn't been sure if she'd get a separate room, as some rich people were understood to do for their wives. She supposed, as he tugged her toward the bed, that she still was not sure. He might shoo her off to another part of his enormous house after - this train of thought was not going to keep her from making embarrassing noises of startlement, she decided -

He sat her down, and sat beside her, and said her name, looking in her eyes again. "Zusan?" he said.

"Siandar?" she replied. He couldn't ask her any questions and if he did he wouldn't understand the answers. Presumably they would learn each other's languages eventually but for the time being she was just coasting on the assumption that a marriage was a marriage and she was here having married him with the hopefully mutual understanding that they would then do marital things.

Whatever he derived from looking at her eyes like that satisfied him, it seemed, because he kissed her again and peeled off all her pretty wedding clothes and, when she made embarrassing noises, Siandar did not seem in the least troubled about them.

Zusan woke in her marriage bed alone, sunshine streaming through the windows. Siandar was an early riser, it seemed, and without anyone knocking on her forehead to remind her to feed the chickens, she was not. She got up and put back on her wedding clothes. She would need to find a servant at some point and have her normal dress brought up the hill so the wedding things could be brought down for the next Nian girl to be married. But there was no urgency, because the cousin she'd shared her bed with would be the next in line and was not yet fifteen, so for the time being she'd wear them for everyday. She got up and went to explore her new home.

He had a lot of people in his house. They were mostly staff, men and women both in the same uniform, distinguishable by how recently they'd chopped off all their hair and by whether they were a little or a lot taller than her, bustling around with papers and trays and cleaning-rags. They all nodded to her politely when she went by and didn't try to steer her away from her gradual mapping of the house: here was where she'd come in, there was the gods' room, there a closet, there a guest room mid-sweep. There was a courtyard, there the stable, there the dining room - when she stepped in a maid asked her "Breakfast, lady?" in paint-peelingly awful renderings of consonants, turning into six syllables what should have been three. It was like Chudarans didn't have voices, just accents.

"Yes, thank you," Zusan replied, without trying to correct her pronunciation, and she was presented with some strange variant on congee, which looked as though there were milk in it and tasted spicy and tart, and she discovered that it had nuts in it by nearly swallowing one unchewed. Once she was used to the flavor it was delicious, if foreign.

She was halfway through her bowl when someone not in servant's livery entered the room. He was dressed in a green Chudaran-style tunic, black on green, as fine as Siandar's blue, and spoke to the servants and got his own bowl of congee just like hers. Sitting down across from her, he smiled, said, "Zusan" and something in his own language. Maybe it was "good morning".

Zusan repeated it back, the presumable good morning, and his smile broadened and he nodded at her, so probably she'd gotten it right. He pointed at things, at the food and the spoons and the table and chairs, and told her their names. A voice called what must be his title, from another room, and he looked at her apologetically and left without even finishing his serving. He'd taught her a dozen words but she hadn't learned his name.

Oh, well. Most likely he lived in the house she now called home. She would learn the names of all of her brothers-in-law (or whoever that was) in time.

She spent the day practicing the words, self-conscious that her accent in Chudaran was quite as bad as the one that encrusted everything the Chudarans said. But if she could understand them when they ventured to speak her language they'd probably do just as well the opposite way. She learned all the corridors and poked around in the suite she was apparently meant to share with Siandar. It had a little dining nook, in case he ever preferred to take his meals in more privacy than the dining hall, and she also found a bathtub and a sitting room with plush chairs and some books.

Zusan could write her name, but not read fluently, and she certainly couldn't decipher Chudaran. She took down a book and paged through it anyway, pretending, looking at the woodcut illustrations and maps tucked in between the mesmerizingly opaque characters.

When she was sure she'd been to every room in the house, she asked servants for the translator - she would have to learn his name

- until, whether due to their understanding or their incomprehension, she was ushered to his office.

"I need to send for my clothes," she told him, "and then return these - they're my family's wedding things."

He puzzled over the sentence a bit, and replied, "I'll send someone down."

"I may not go?"

"I've had no word about it. You can ask, of course."

"Thank you," Zusan said, bowing, and the translator did know how to tell her that was enough. She straightened while he summoned up a runner to make the exchange of outfits.

"Is that all?" he asked her.

"Do you know when I will next see my husband?"

"I will not - presume," he replied, with a great pause before "presume" as he fished for the word.

"Do I have - duties, chores -"

"I have not been told of any. Some ladies take up instruments," he added, helpfully, "until there are children."

"Instruments," said Zusan. Everyone sang, sometimes, while they were working, and her family owned a drum that some of her relatives tapped out rhythms on in idle moments, but no one in Quan was a *musician*.

"I believe there is a flute somewhere in your chambers."

"I see. I should - learn more Chudaran," she said, "how shall I do that?"

The translator sighed. "I can send one of the maids to try to instruct you. I do not have the time."

So Zusan went back to her room, and looked around until she found the flute in a drawer. She made clumsy sounds with it till a maid came by, introduced herself as Jaruti, and began to offer Chudaran words. They began with the ones the maid could render into the local tongue, which Zusan appreciated, since it was impossible to point at a "hello" or a "thank you".

Eventually the girl ducked out to fetch Zusan lunch. She didn't bring any for herself, and Zusan reflected that having servants might have some drawbacks, like the fact that now she had to interrupt her language lesson to try to convey across the remaining gulf that Jaruti was free to go have her own meal. It took nearly ten minutes before Jaruti managed to get across that she'd eaten already and would stay, by which time Zusan's flat bread and sauced meat were getting cold. But Zusan did feel some of her new words solidifying in place as they were used in terrible awkward strings to try to have an actual conversation, so she accounted for that as a positive.

Jaruti stayed all afternoon. She knew the numbers one to ten, and yes and no, and "my lord", which suggested Siandar meant to be addressed in local parlance rather than importing whatever the Chudaran title would be. Zusan drilled and drilled and made silly little phrases with the words her brother-in-law had taught her over breakfast - two spoons, thank you for the chair, good morning my lord. Jaruti suppressed giggles, but Zusan could hardly hold it against her.

Zusan's clothes arrived right before she meant to go to the dining room for supper. She shooed Jaruti and the runner who'd brought them, changed into her comfortable old blue hemp, and folded up the bridal things to be toted back down the hill for the next Nian girl's wedding. Siandar ought to have no trouble recognizing her,

even having known her for only a day, since she was the only non-Chudaran who'd be eating with him unless he'd invited guests.

There were guests, but no Siandar, just the man in green from breakfast and some representatives from a merchant family from two villages down. It was a husband and wife, and they introduced themselves and Zusan recognized the surname. They spoke some Chudaran, but talked to Zusan too, and the wife sometimes translated jokes this way and that. She would be able to have a real conversation with her husband soon, she thought. When he was around. Maybe he was out on some sort of business. It took hours to walk to the next village but he had horses and could get there and back and be only late for dinner.

She ate what she was served - it was all *so* tasty once she got used to the spices - and retired to her room. She didn't have room in her head for more new words; she thought of them as lyrics, while she piped odd puffy shrieks on the flute and tried to find enough different notes to make a tune. *Hello one table, thank you bowl, yes my lord, welcome to the ceiling...*

The door opened, and Zusan looked up from her consternated musical attempts, smiling, only to see the man in green smiling back at her. She set the flute down, trying to compose a question out of dishes and furniture, but came up empty. "My lord," she said.

"Zusan," he replied cheerfully, and he shut the door behind him and crossed the floor to kiss her.

She knew the words "no, my lord", Zusan reflected later while she watched the low, banked firelight throw shadows on the walls. She could have said "Siandar", softly to remind this person of her husband who she did not mean to betray, or loudly to bring Siandar running if he were anywhere in the house. She could have started babbling in Quan dialect and hoped he assumed that this constituted

some suitably dire warning. She could have flung herself toward the door, run out of the room, burst into the translator's office and hoped he was still at work. She was not sure why she had not done any of these things.

She supposed it would be abstractly interesting, if it was the way of Chudarans to promise a family no taxes as long as their provided daughter should live as the wife of the governor, and then arrange to loan her to a brother or a friend and put her to death for the infidelity. It was the sort of thing that would be half-discounted as wild rumor. People as far away as the Imperial capital would be arguing with each other about whether she had really met such an end or if actually that was a slanderous exaggeration of a simple encounter with the pox.

It could be less dire than that, of course. Perhaps Chudarans were accustomed to sharing wives between brothers, and she'd thought she'd married just the one but this other, or a whole pack of them, were likewise entitled. She had not received much detail on matrimonial expectations in Chudara beforehand. This could be completely normal, which would explain why he hadn't acted like he was doing anything that was likely to wind up with anyone dead.

She could just imagine the translator responding to a question on the matter with *I will not - presume* . Maybe it was not a typical Chudaran behavior but one that nobody would dream of denying to Siandar's brother, who might well be important in his own right.

She fell asleep, after she knew not how long, waiting for Siandar to come home and catch her in bed with this person. When she woke in the morning, though, neither he nor anyone else was there.

At breakfast Siandar was still not home and the man in green did not attend *either* , though there was someone in *yellow* , who attempted to teach her the word for what the kitchen was serving but stopped trying when she stared at him blankly. She wondered how many

brothers there were, and where Siandar was. It was a little silly of her to miss him. They had not had twenty years to fall in love over their mutual delight in a passel of children, they had not grown into shape around each other like two adjacent trees. She'd barely met him. But she *did* miss him, or at least her folksong idea of him, the exotic gentry taking one look at her and deciding she'd be his bride and live in his beautiful house.

Apparently the folksong had a few verses about other people in his beautiful house and their designs on his bride. Apparently he himself barely lived in his beautiful house.

Zusan wished she could ask - if she waited till she had enough Chudaran, it would be too late to earn any mercy for a quick confession, but if she tried to go through the translator now - she was not sure exactly how this would go wrong but it seemed like it might be the sort of thing which would manage to violate six taboos at once. Perhaps she ought to do it anyway before she'd borne a dubiously legitimate child into the line of fire, though.

When Siandar came home she would try, she decided. It would be very plain when she threw herself on his mercy that *something* was the matter, and then he could bring in the translator and that would be his decision, not hers.

That night the brother in yellow came to the room, and Zusan held herself very stiff, and watched him approach. He slowed down, stopping before he reached her, and cocked his head. "Zusan...?" he said.

She wrapped her arms around herself, not quite meaning to, and met his gaze. He looked at her, seeming confused somehow, and finally sighed and shook his head and shrugged off the yellow jacket. He tossed it to the floor and tucked himself under the covers without touching her.

Zusan was still for a minute or two, and then tucked herself in on the other side of the bed. There was so much space that she could imagine she was alone. And when she woke up the next morning, she really was, once more.

At breakfast, there was Siandar, blue-clad, pensive. He must have gotten in early, and had been on an errand that troubled him. She wished she could ask what it was. But she had something else she needed to ask, much more urgently, words or no words.

She swept past the bowl placed for her on the table and collapsed to her knees besides Siandar's chair and began, in all her pent-up fear and upset, to try to explain what had happened. She spoke Quan dialect; being understood in exact content was not the main point. All this needed to do was put him in a gentle mood when he had her before the translator.

Siandar looked down at her in absolute bafflement. She ran out of new ways to apologize, and trailed off rather than have further hysterics about how you really need to tell people if they are also marrying your brothers, and dropped her forehead onto his thigh.

"Zusan..." he said. "...what?" he went on, which was very fair as his progress in her language was not much faster than hers in his, but was not what she'd envisioned as the next step here.

"I'm sorry," she said, for the tenth time, without looking up.

His hand touched her cheek and he tipped up her face and stared into her eyes, for a long moment, and a longer one, staring and staring. She dropped her eyes down to the floor, but he said, "Zusan, *please*," and she looked back up at him again. She had no idea what he wanted from her - if he had any idea what she'd been trying to convey - but every time she glanced away he repeated her name, so she looked and looked and looked.

At long last he made a distressed noise, seized her hand and tugged her to her feet. Pulled her out of the dining room and down the hall and - not to the translator's office, but - to their bedroom. He released her hand as the door swung shut behind them and she watched him - he looked confused, but more than that *troubled*, like he'd learned that the moon was falling from the sky: a bewildering fact, but moreover one that presaged a colossal crash.

There was, it turned out, a drawer *under* the bed. Her explorations had not apprised her of this. Siandar pulled it out with a thump and plunged both hands into it and drew out fancy bright Chudaran jackets, two of them - one green, one yellow.

Zusan blinked. Those were the outfits belonging to the people she'd been assuming were his brothers. Since they also slept in this room it was not so odd that they'd have stored their clothes here - maybe they wore something less fine to go traveling or whatever it was they were doing -

Siandar was staring at her eyes again, and she understood now what he expected when he did that and stared back. At length he shook his head and tossed the jackets on top of the bedspread and unbuttoned his blue one. And then he picked up the green one - seemed to think better of it - put on the yellow one, half-fastened it, spread his arms.

"Siandar," he said, gesturing at himself, and then, wincing, he waved his arm at the green jacket too. Repeated: "Siandar."

Vaguely aware that her mouth was hanging open, Zusan attempted to make some sound of comprehension.

Siandar shrugged off the yellow garment. Started to put the blue one back on.

Zusan took six steps forward and - did his buttons for him, by way of apology. No one had ever pointed at a "sorry". Her head was ducked

low, embarrassed. Of course he was rich! Of course he had three sets of clothes! Maybe he had even more! Of course with his accent she hadn't been able to learn his voice - but then what had he *expected* her to do? He cut his hair the same as all the other Chudarans, even the servants; he was not some seven foot tall mountain of a man she could identify by the crick in her neck; he did not have a mole affixed to his chin -

He tipped her head up again and she pouted up at him, indignant, and this time it seemed to take him fewer seconds to see what he wanted to see in her eyes. He sighed, and tugged her out of the room again when the last button was done.

Back in the dining room, he summoned servants out of the kitchen, and sent them to find more, all in their livery, and with a few sentences of Chudaran had them all line up, and, while he covered his eyes, rearrange themselves in the line until they were placed at random. He pointed at one, and said a name. The servant bowed and left. He pointed at the next, said another name - Jaruti was third, Zusan hadn't been sure she was in line - one by one he identified them all, though they were all in uniform.

Oh, of course, Chudarans could read minds sometimes, he'd been demonstrating - but surely he knew that the local gift, which was rare anyway, was archery -

"No!" Siandar said, frustrated, and he dismissed all the servants, and *this* time he brought her to the translator's office.

Some ten minutes of rapid Chudaran jabbering later, the translator stiffly informed her that Siandar had not expected *her* to be able to read *his* mind, but that it was usual for people to be able to distinguish one another by *face*, even if the faces were similar enough to belong to brothers, so long as the brothers were not twins.

When this explanation had been delivered Siandar made sure it had landed, looking again at her eyes, and decided that it was done to his satisfaction. Less urgently, he led her back to their bedroom, and pulled her to sit beside him on the edge of the bed, and he held her. "Zusan," he sighed.

"Siandar," she said, leaning on him. It was a palpable relief to know it had been only him all along, that no one was going to behead her and fraternal betrayal was not going to provoke a family feud and she had not been married to a pack of different men as a surprise custom. It was disconcerting to find that she had, all her life, lacked a typical non-magical ability, and was only now learning of its existence. But compared to what she had feared, that was welcome news.

They sat there, and then Siandar's stomach rumbled.

"Food," Zusan said in Chudaran.

"Food," Siandar agreed, and they went together to the dining room.

And that evening, Siandar found in one of his drawers a silver chain with a pendant, and he put it over his neck, and left it there even when he was wearing nothing else. And when Zusan looked him in the eye in the dim firelight and wondered if he would leave it there always so she'd know him, he smiled and said, "Yes," and kissed her.

Ibyabek

Kyeo held down the low harmony to the Anthem of the Bright Way by himself during passing period. The other two boys who knew the harmony and had the range for it, Saro and Irabe, were paired, and staying back at the teacher's request to clarify the answers they'd given on part of the test. Or that one of them had, anyway; there was no way for Kyeo to tell which one. Though he could guess. Saro couldn't stop asking for comparisons to other planets' philosophies, when other planets didn't *have* real philosophies, they were just soulless disorganized pits hardly anyone could afford to live well in. Still, maybe Irabe had written something dumb on his exam.

Everyone else in Merit Class 1 jogged to lunch, singing, most on the melody, Mar and Soh on high harmony. When he'd first been assigned to Soh, Kyeo had taught him the third part to that and a few other songs, though he'd had to demonstrate the tenor parts an octave down. Soh had gotten only a little music in primary school, not enough to pick up harmony parts but enough to learn them when taught.

They didn't study music any more in secondary school. They'd just come from Philosophy, studied much more intensively now that they were teenagers and could absorb difficult concepts a little boy would struggle with. After lunch would be military prep, Kyeo's favorite in the absence of a music slot.

The bread at lunch was only a day old, if Kyeo was any judge, probably baked the evening before. His mother used to make fresh bread, when she could get yeast, and they'd eat it still hot, but of course it was not efficient for the kitchens to make enough bread for hundreds of students in time for lunch every morning, particularly not when many of the workers in the kitchen were students themselves and needed to attend classes in the morning and

afternoon and were only available after supper. The vegetables served alongside the bread were floating in a thin soup.

Kyeo saw a lot of sorrel in his bowl. When he'd been a child, still going home from school every day to his mother's cooking and more spoiled, he'd traded away his sorrel for cabbage whenever possible. But he wasn't going to ask Soh about that. Soh was already having enough trouble growing into the mature equanimity that Ibyabek expected of its men. Though he did well enough in school to be part of Merit Class 1, he complained, muttering to himself or even to Kyeo and their other friends about landscaping duty or cleaning duty or kitchen duty. Sometimes he complained about other things, too. If he couldn't rein it in he wasn't going to go on to a good career, and then he'd have a lot more to complain about and a lot less leeway to write it off as youthful silliness.

Kyeo ate his sorrel. He was getting used to it, just like his father always said he would whenever he stopped avoiding it.

"They've been serving us this same soup for a week," said Soh.

The vegetables had come in soup form for a week, but that wasn't uncommon. "The soup is good," said Kyeo firmly when he'd swallowed his mouthful of sorrel. "If the vegetables were very plentiful a week ago of course it will take some time to eat them all, but they make the soup fresh." Kyeo hadn't had kitchen duty in a month, but it hardly mattered either way.

"I keep finding broccoli in it," said Soh. "There's never broccoli except the one time, there's no way they got more broccoli every day for a week. It's the same, they made a very big batch. They don't want to make new soup on our last days."

"If there's broccoli that means there's plenty of broccoli. Don't talk nonsense," said Kyeo.

Soh shut up and ate his soup, mostly by soaking it up with his bread. The rest of the lunch conversation was about how Garhan needed to stop elbowing people while playing ball. Garhan sheepishly agreed he would try harder. Saro and Irabe caught up and had to bolt down their lunches in just four minutes.

They went to Military Prep after they were all finished with their meals, and when three steps had passed without anyone starting up a song, Kyeo sang the opening line of Sunrise on Ibyabek. "Our Ibyabek, which cares for every one of its children in our brightest way..." Everyone's gait fell into the beat as the other boys joined in.

Since it was the last day of term, all the classes were exams. Philosophy had the hardest tests, but Military Prep was grueling even with the physical exercise portion separated into gym; it had an extra long block in the day to accommodate the gigantic paper test, and time for some students to take their test orally in much less time with the teacher or teaching assistant one at a time. "It's a problem with the printer," Kyeo said to Chavyuo on their way out of the classroom. Chavyuo had been one of the unlucky boys who hadn't gotten a paper copy and was trembling a little, like he always did when afraid he'd performed poorly on an exam.

"I know that," said Chavyuo. "Last term we had those electronic tablets. Those worked well as long as the teachers remembered to charge them while the power was on. Where did they go?"

Kyeo shrugged. Soh opined, "Teacher Salgun sold them on the black market."

"Don't say that," said Kyeo. Teacher Salgun had all the hallmarks of a black marketeer, from the smell of coffee wafting from his thermos to the suspicious shine of his shoes, but accusing him of stealing from the school was too far for Soh to get away with. "It isn't true." It could have been something else. Maybe all the tablets broke, or

they were needed for another school, though since Bright City was the most important city on Ibyabek and their school Academy of Merit was the best secondary school in Bright City Kyeo wasn't sure who else would be better recipients of the tablets.

They had two more exams before supper. The foreign language test on Kularan Creole was proctored by the teaching assistant. Kyeo wasn't sure what had happened to the teacher, a real citizen of United Kular who had been brought to Ibyabek to instruct the students in her mother tongue. She was the only female teacher Kyeo had ever had, although he understood it to be common in Kular for women to have careers of their own, if they were unable to find husbands due to the general dissolution of the male population. There was nothing else they could do, since nothing in Kular was distributed freely and they had no choice but to work to support themselves. Kyeo wasn't clear if Teacher Sujan was being paid by the Ibyabekan government to teach her language or not. It seemed like it would be vulgar for them to do so, and she got to sleep in the teacher dormitories like the Ibyabekan teachers did, and eat with everyone else in the cafeteria, so maybe she was here for that reason.

At any rate, he felt that he had done well on his Kularan test. He wasn't as good as Soh was at remembering what all the grammatical complications were called (Kularan was a really terribly elaborate language, and Kyeo had heard that Ibyabekan was gaining popularity there because it was so logical and easy to pick up, not to mention beautifully pronounced). But he was good at actually speaking it fluently, and the teaching assistant had apparently used limited printer access to get one vocabulary section printed for everyone and then rendered the rest of the test as conversation in Kularan.

Maybe Teacher Sujan had done something wrong and was in trouble. But there was no point in guessing.

Gym ended the day, to work up their appetites for dinner. The exam resembled a normal class, except they didn't get to play ball and there was less shouted encouragement from the teacher when they fell behind their goals at running laps and lifting weights and clambering through the obstacle course that was supposed to be similar to the inside of a military spaceship that had taken damage.

They showered. The water was cold this time, which Kyeo didn't really object to amid cries of disappointment from the others. To his mind it was less awkward for everyone to equally be the target of giggles about shrunken genitals from the chill than for all the mockery to disproportionately fall on whoever had a badly timed erection for no reason, often him.

They didn't linger, not in cold water. Five minutes to get the sweat off and apply and remove some desultory soap and they could get into their day clothes and go eat.

The bread was a little staler at dinner than lunch. The soup was the same. There was a piece of broccoli in Kyeo's bowl, floating in the middle. Soh gave him a sidelong look. Kyeo kicked him in the ankle, just lightly, and concentrated on making himself eat his sorrel.

After dinner Kyeo brought Soh with him to Teacher Salgun's office. Soh whined and dragged his feet - he was exhausted from gym class and wanted to lie down for a bit - but sometimes Teacher Salgun would share a bit of chocolate, which didn't grow on Ibyabek and was probably disloyal to like but was certainly very compelling to a certain sort of person. Kyeo didn't want to go anywhere alone. It looked suspicious, and furthermore neglected his duty to keep an eye on Soh. So he hauled Soh along with him and went to Teacher Salgun and asked, "May I borrow your phone and call my father?"

There was a free phone line that any student could use on campus, which he could have walked over to the minders' office hallway to

use, but it usually didn't work when Kyeo tried it, and he'd stopped bothering to check as long as Teacher Salgun with his cell phone was around. Teacher Salgun's cellphone was only three years old and worked nearly every time, though it was still possible that Kyeo's father wouldn't be available to answer it on his own cell phone. Kyeo had a very important father, Suor Sebe Luk, who was often in meetings with other very important people, sometimes even people who knew and personally relayed the will of the Glorious Leader Lut Naar Am. Kyeo's mother did not have a phone, and neither did his sister, but Suor could relay messages, when there were any - once he had even been able to put Kyeo's mother on the phone when he'd happened to be home sick during the call. Kyeo's older sister Aipen had married several years before and if her husband had a phone number Kyeo didn't know it, so he hadn't heard from her since the wedding, but he had a photo of her smiling with her hair pinned up the day she'd married.

This time, when Teacher Salgun handed over his phone and took Kyeo's two kal bill, and Kyeo dialed, Suor picked up. "This is Coordinator Suor Sebe Luk," he said.

"Father, it's me," said Kyeo.

"Kyeo! Why are you calling? I'll be seeing you tomorrow!"

Kyeo blinked. "Really?"

"They haven't told you yet, I see. Yes, tomorrow you're coming home, I requested you and the Distributor agreed. I have some work for you to do with me in my office."

Kyeo had been expecting to spend the school break working - well, apparently he would be working, but he'd been expecting to make bricks or get placed on a farm, to repay Ibyabek for his care and education all given him for free. "That's wonderful, Father! Thank you so much."

"I'll tell you all about it when I pick you up tomorrow."

"You're coming to pick me up yourself?"

"Yes, be out waiting by the gate right after your breakfast, I'll expect you. It's very delicate work, you'll need to be sharp."

"Yes Father," said Kyeo, "of course, Father."

"I have to hang up now, things are busy here. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes Father," Kyeo repeated, and he ended the call and handed the phone back to Teacher Salgun. "Thank you, Teacher."

"Anytime, Kyeo," the teacher replied, waving him and Soh out of the office.

Soh, sour about not having received a chocolate, grumbled on their way back to the dorm. " *You* get a work detail at home with your family! I'm on paving."

"You like paving," Kyeo said.

"I like it more than I like landscaping. *If* they have me driving the machine. I'd rather be doing science, though."

"You'll get to do science if science is where you can do the best work for Ibyabek," recited Kyeo.

Soh visibly repressed a grumble. "I do well in science!"

"We aren't out of school yet. Strong young bodies are what we have to offer while we work on developing our minds." Kyeo wasn't paying much attention to the conversation; when talking to Soh he frequently fell back on directly quoting their philosophy teacher.

"Easy for you to say, working with your father," Soh said.

"I said it last break too."

Soh didn't answer. Since it was the last day, there was no homework, only packing. Kyeo folded all his uniforms into the string bag he used for luggage, left his textbooks out in the hallway where they'd be collected for the next people to enter his class level while he was issued new ones, and went to bed early so he could be ready for his father.

It was a beautiful day, sunny with only a few wisps of cloud unspooled across the sky. Kyeo received his work assignment formally with his breakfast (porridge, served cold today for some reason) - the worker who put it in front of him, a student from a junior class, recited it for him. He looked tired; he must have been up late memorizing which assignments went to which students. This might have worried Kyeo if he'd been told he was supposed to go work in a water treatment plant but he got the news he expected.

As soon as he'd eaten his porridge, Kyeo said goodbye to all his friends and collected his bag from his room, checking in the crack-edged mirror in the communal bathroom that his hair was combed so Suor wouldn't scold him. He tucked a strand back into place and hurried out.

He waited inside the gate but in clear view of it; the boys guarding the gate looked at his name tag and nodded to each other, expecting him.

There wasn't a bench, or even a retaining wall to sit on, so Kyeo stood, trying not to look like he was imitating the guards lest it seem mocking or suspicious. He'd been on guard duty before, but the posture didn't come naturally to him, so he wasn't likely to accidentally line up with them if he paid any attention.

Father arrived in the back of a black car when it would have almost been lunchtime, had Kyeo been staying on campus during the school

break for a work rotation. The guards let Kyeo out when they looked at the paperwork the driver showed them through the bars, and Kyeo slipped into the near seat and beamed at his father, who clapped him on the back.

"Your grades are good," Suor commented.

There was no correct response there - Suor didn't like to be thanked for stating facts like that - so Kyeo ducked his head and smiled. "It's good to see you," he said.

"You'll be home for the entire break - possibly longer. The new ambassador from United Kular has brought his family, and his son is your age. I need you to serve as a minder for him. A little like a school paimate."

Kyeo was silent for a second. This was an intimidating job, one where not just a team he was on, but he alone, might wind up responsible for things of importance to Ibyabek. An ambassador's son could know nothing, could say nothing, he might just want to play sports all day. But he might say things that Kyeo would have to report, and be discreet about collecting for those reports lest the other boy clam up. Or he could have ideas of sabotaging Ibyabek and its institutions, the way foreign entrants were sometimes caught doing. Kyeo's job could either be a guard duty assignment - waiting for nothing to happen - or a critical intelligence mission.

"Yes Father," Kyeo said when he'd had a moment to digest this.

The car bumped over a pothole and Kyeo grabbed the handle sewn to the roof of the car to stabilize himself on the ragged section of pavement.

"You'll be introduced tonight," said Suor. "I couldn't put it off any longer but fortunately did not have to pull you out of school early. They have been on the planet for two days now, but have spent the time confined to their residence apart from the ambassador's

meetings. Now that you are available to keep an eye on the boy the wife's minder will be able to escort her out of the house occasionally too. I want you to stick close to the boy's mother and her minder at first, but you will be able to take him on some tours alone later."

"Yes, Father."

"You haven't been to any parties like tonight's. Very important people will be there. Not the Glorious Leader, but a lot of people close to him, several foreigners apart from the ambassador and his wife and child, many people with good connections and good families. You will need to be on your absolute best behavior, and get to know the Kularan boy at the same time."

"What is his name?"

"Sarham Peng." Kyeo waited for a third name before remembering that Kularans didn't use clan names to subdivide surnames, the way his family was Sebe Luk but there were also Tohek Luk and Redae Luk and Suwang Luk and other Luk families. "The ambassador is Wulaar Peng, and his wife is Umi Peng. Do you have that memorized?"

"Sarham Peng is my pairmate, his parents are Wulaar and Umi Peng," repeated Kyeo.

"Good," said Suor.

"How is Mother?" asked Kyeo. He wanted to ask about Aipen too, but his father might not have any news of her, and it was probably better not to draw attention to questions that couldn't be answered. If Suor knew how his daughter was doing he'd probably volunteer that on his own and Kyeo wouldn't need to ask.

"Your mother's recovering from that problem she had with her foot quite well," Suor replied. "She can walk without crutches for a few

minutes every day, so those will be returned to the hospital soon. The garden's thriving, she can do most of that sitting down."

"Oh, good," Kyeo said. "It will be good to see her."

"You'll see her, but you need to stick to the Peng boy like glue," cautioned Suor. "You might have to be up early and home late. If he invites you to stay the night in the house they're being provided, you accept."

"Yes Father."

"Most likely he will not make such an invitation right after meeting you, but try to make a good impression at the party."

"Of course."

The party was opulent. Kyeo had trouble at first taking in the details of the food and decor, as though really it were all a smear that a dreaming mind had labeled "rich, elaborate, luxurious". But after a moment to breathe, trailing his father up the carpeted stairs, the colors on the upper floor started to resolve themselves into plates of stuffed mushrooms and deviled eggs carried by silently gliding waiters. The statuary, at intervals around the railing that prevented people from pitching off the huge balcony to the ground floor, was clarified as marble abstracts here, larger-than-life sculptures of the Glorious Leader there, wire trees with stone leaves and fruits across the room. Plaques labeled them as gifts to the Glorious Leader from celebrated offplanet artists, in some cases, or the magnum opus of one of the great creative minds on Ibyabek. Kyeo smoothed the long heavy sleeves of the outfit his father had lent him, but couldn't keep all the wrinkles from coming back across the dark blue and burgundy whenever he bent his arm.

The atmosphere was smoky, where it wasn't perfumed; it was more conspicuous the deeper they waded into the party. Clusters of men

stood with their feet sinking deep into the carpet, puffing cigarettes and making small talk; others sat at chairs that at least *looked* like blue-upholstered solid gold. Women stood out, wearing paler colors than the dark masculine ones (sky blue instead of navy, pink rather than deep red, and so on). The women were mostly around Kyeo's age or a little older - Morale Corps girls, all in the same cut of dress though the fabrics differed. They leaned towards men they were chatting with, trailing their fingers along their arms. Kyeo didn't have to deal with any of those, he expected - he wasn't important enough for them to approach him. There were also a couple of older women; most people didn't bring their wives to these parties, so Kyeo scanned for pastels, looking for a foreign face that might indicate the Ambassador's wife and, presumably, their son nearby.

There she was; and there he was, if Kyeo didn't miss his guess. Umi Peng, wearing canary yellow, was darker-skinned than the Ibyabekans in the room. Not dark enough that she couldn't simply have come straight off a farming rotation, but of course no one at the party had been on a farming rotation in years if that. Sarham (Kyeo presumed) was standing at her elbow. Just a couple inches taller than she was, Sarham wasn't much lighter than his mother, though he looked it since he was wearing black. Kyeo didn't see anyone who was obviously the Ambassador.

"I think I see him," Kyeo murmured to Suor.

"Good. Do you need to be introduced?"

"It would help."

So Suor went toward the ambassadorial wife and child with Kyeo. The two were whispering to each other and didn't notice they were being approached until Kyeo had come to a stop within arm's length of Sarham. "Mrs. Peng," said Suor, "and son, I'm Suor Sebe Luk, we spoke on the phone this morning."

"Yes, I remember," confirmed Umi cordially. "And this is?"

"My son Kyeo Sebe Luk," said Suor, patting Kyeo firmly on the shoulder. Kyeo smiled - at Umi first, since she was the person Suor was ostensibly talking to, but then at Sarham. Sarham blinked back at him, nonplussed. "He's a student, but he's just begun his break from school and I brought him with me to this gathering. I thought young Sarham might like to have someone his own age showing him around the beauty of Ibyabek."

"Hello," said Kyeo, unsure exactly how cheerful he was meant to sound and concerned he landed somewhere north of manic. "It's a pleasure to meet you both. Welcome to Ibyabek."

"It's been lovely so far," said Sarham. "Though we haven't seen much yet."

"I'll be happy to show you the sights!" Kyeo said. Still too chirpy by far. There was no reason to be this excited about toting a foreigner through museums and architectural projects and escorting him to concerts and theater. How could he tone it down without making it even more conspicuous by the transition? "You'll have to tell me what interests you most, of course, and I don't know what other schedule of appointments you might have yet."

"Of course," agreed Sarham. "But I'm excited to see whatever's locally a must-see, of course, I wouldn't want to insist on one thing and find out later it wasn't what was most worth my time."

Kyeo smiled at him and said, "That makes sense!", but wasn't quite sure what to make of the statement. It occurred to him that he didn't know how *Sarham* was conceptualizing his role during his time on Ibyabek. He might be what amounted to a tourist - a nonessential attachment to his father's presence - or he might be a spy, but even if he was a spy, how did Kularans handle spying? What about his plan here was generating phrases like "worth my time" and "insist on one thing"? It was a little like he was a fairytale character of some kind. Kyeo didn't have the slightest idea in that moment

what it was like to be Sarham, the way he'd always been able to figure out more or less what it was like to be Soh or his other previous pairmates.

Someone who Kyeo assumed had to be Sarham's father, Ambassador Peng, sidled up to Umi and put his arm around her. "Hello there," he said to Suor. "Is this your son who you mentioned?"

"Yes. Kyeo, this is the ambassador, Wulaar Peng."

"Welcome to Ibyabek!" Kyeo said again, managing a more level tone this time. "I'm delighted to make your acquaintance."

"Thank you," said Ambassador Peng. "It's always interesting to meet more Ibyabekans. You're about Sarham's age?"

"In Earth years I'm seventeen," said Kyeo. He usually thought of his age in Ibyabekan years, which were longer and marked him as currently thirteen, but offplanet (he had learned in school) they mostly used Earth years even when their own planets differed. As a child Kyeo had always wondered why other people didn't use Ibyabekan years, which seemed to him to divide time into the most useful units. But of course no one was willing to so overtly acknowledge Ibyabek's centrality to human life in general, not when they had their own egos to prop up and a pathological fascination with Earth - as though civilization hadn't progressed since the species was trapped there. Maybe he'd teach Sarham to use Ibyabekan years. His command of the language was all right, but it might or might not have covered how to use time the way Ibyabekans did.

"So is Sarham!" said Wulaar. "I'm glad they dug up somebody his own age so he's not stuck in the house or following around adults all day long."

"I would have been fine following adults around," opined Sarham.

"You would have had to wait outside a lot of conference rooms," Wulaar replied. "Some things might be sensitive, and I'd have to leave you out of things that weren't too, for cover about the exact quantity and frequency of the sensitive stuff!" He grinned and clapped Sarham on the back. "You'll find the museums - interesting, I'm sure. And whatever else is the current tourist stuff."

"All right," said Sarham. "Uh, will I see you tomorrow morning then?"

"Yes," said Kyeo, after a quick glance at his father, "I'll pick you up at your house." He was only guessing he'd be able to get a car for the purpose; if he couldn't he might have a long walk ahead, but he was fit enough to manage if necessary. "I can figure out an itinerary for us and we can adjust it if anything special comes to your mind."

Wulaar apparently considered the situation well enough under control to move on to another area of the party. Umi was still nearby, but she was distracted by speaking in a low voice to one of the Morale Corps girls who was smiling fixedly at her and shifting her weight like she wanted to escape. Suor didn't go far, but stepped into the circle of another conversation some five feet away, and was quickly absorbed in discussing what sounded like some fine point of philosophy or possibly economics with the other important men who'd been invited to the party. Kyeo and Sarham were as alone as they were going to get while they were still at the party, and Kyeo, who had never done anything this potentially high-stakes in his life, found his heartbeat agitated with the stress of it.

"A lot of people smoke here," Sarham remarked after a few beats of silence.

"Most people don't. This is just that kind of party," Kyeo assured him. Mostly, cigarettes of any kind - local tobacco that was supposed to be diverted for use by select individuals, or smuggled offplanet herbs and alien leaves and fancier tobacco - were contraband,

traded covertly between people who wanted other contraband or money or favors, sourced from an increasingly dubious chain of lawbreakers eventually terminating in a foreign drug-runner who brought intoxicants both smokeable and otherwise from decadent worlds where they were as abundant as air. Some local tobacco was allowed, and even imported cigarettes were permitted on special occasions for people presumed to be above suspicion of any worse infraction. This was a special occasion and the people at the party were presumably all of impeccable reputation, and so could waive requirements that they be quite perfectly straitlaced in terms of what they inhaled. A worrying lapse a low-merit laborer might have to hide if he could afford it at all was practically a badge of status for those who'd achieved higher levels of recognition for their rarer contribution to Ibyabek.

Kyeo'd never personally had a cigarette, though he knew some students in his year who smelled of it now and then, having traded this and that for their forbidden luxuries with other students, the staff at the school, or even the teachers.

"What kind of party?" asked Sarham.

"The kind where people smoke."

"Do you go to a lot of parties?"

"Not usually ones like this with my father," said Kyeo. "But student parties, sure, all the time." Were any of the times Kyeo and his classmates hung out really parties? No, probably not, on reflection, it was just meals in the cafeteria, classes, work assignments.

Sometimes they amused themselves by planning things like that - "next week we can go to the restaurant on First Street, and order snails and grapefruit ices and whatever else they have, and sing along to whatever's on the radio" - but then the next week would come and of course they'd all be on campus as they always were, with no idea whether the restaurant even allowed students or had a

radio. They'd never been inside restaurants except for a couple who'd gone with their especially important fathers; Kyeo's father was important but this had never happened to lead him to bring his family out to eat.

"Student parties, right. Any of those going on any time soon?"

"Well, school is on a break now, so we're not convenient to our classmates," Kyeo explained. "I don't know if you will be here that long, and I will stay with you if you are, anyway."

"Won't you fall behind?" Sarham asked.

"I can catch up," said Kyeo. "Don't worry about it." Kyeo was not exactly unconcerned about that, but his father and the school would work something out, even if it wasn't maximally convenient, and it would be embarrassingly immature to complain about having to do extra studying or falling back half a year.

"If you say so," said Sarham. "What are you studying in school?"

"The same things as everyone else," said Kyeo. "I'm going to go into the military."

Sarham seemed to repress a wince. He said nothing for a long, uncomfortable moment, and then Kyeo said, "I suppose you go to school too."

"Yes," Sarham said, "sometimes. Other times I have tutors, if we're moving too much or if I'm trying to learn something very fast."

"Something like what?"

"I had to learn So- I had to learn Ibyabekan to come here," said Sarham. Kyeo knew he'd been about to say "Sohaibekan", since they still spoke the same language on Outer Sohaibek, with which Ibyabek had once been unified until they'd rebelled against the

modern order. Reportedly, lots of people called Ibyabek "Inner Sohaibek", even though it was disrespectful to call their planet anything other than what their first Glorious Leader had named it.

Kyeo shrugged it off; Sarham had caught himself before fully delivering the insult. "Your accent is pretty good."

"Thanks. My tutor -" Sarham stopped, mouth partly open, then gracelessly didn't finish whatever he'd been going to say about his tutor. Even if it were sensitive information somehow, couldn't he have made something up? This left an odd hole in the conversation.

Attempting to fill the hole, Kyeo said, "Do you want to go sit down?"

"Can we sit on the floor? I think it might be less smoky."

Kyeo... wasn't sure if they could sit on the floor. No one else was doing it, but allowances were made for young people, sometimes. Was this one of those times? He had no idea, and he would look ridiculous asking his father, and worse if he said it was fine and it wasn't after all. "No," he said confidently, "but we can go downstairs and find some benches there to sit on instead, that will be even better." He took the end of Sarham's sleeve in his hand, noted Sarham's noise of unprotesting surprise, and wove between Morale Corps girls and ranking political movers and shakers to the staircase.

There were benches down there; Kyeo picked one and released Sarham's sleeve to sit down on it. "Better?"

"Lots. People don't smoke on United Kular planets, or hardly at all."

"Do you go to parties like this there?" wondered Kyeo, because people hardly smoked at all on Ibyabek either, and you'd miss most of it if you lived on a farm or something.

"Once or twice. Not often. I wasn't old enough for Dad to start taking me along to functions till recently."

The word "Dad" must have been something they said on Outer Sohaibek; Kyeo could figure out what it meant from context and its relation to the word babies called their fathers, but was otherwise unfamiliar with it. Kyeo had called his father "pada" until he'd been old enough to pronounce the fully formalized version. "Me either," said Kyeo.

"What does your dad do exactly?"

Kyeo was on a need to know basis about that, and didn't need to know, so he invented. "He's Glorious Leader's subordinate - a couple levels down, you understand, not direct, but I haven't met his immediate boss - in the department of foreign relations and trade."

"Wow," said Sarham. "My father didn't use to be an ambassador. I can remember when he was an interpreter in somebody else's office handling visa stuff and -" Sarham hesitated. "- and passport stuff," he concluded, which seemed lame enough to not have likely been what he'd tripped over. "Just as much travel and we didn't stay in nearly as nice hotels."

Kyeo almost asked if the Ibyabekan house Sarham was staying in was as nice as foreign hotels. But framing it that way made it sound like he expected it to be worse, when of course Ibyabek could pamper an ambassador better than anybody except insofar as Ibyabek wasn't going to let people starve or die of untreated injuries or anything to spare extra cash for pointless luxuries, and maybe Sarham would have preferred the pointless luxuries version of the house even if a peasant somewhere missed out on government services they needed as a result of the misappropriation of funds.

Kyeo followed this train of thought long enough to pause noticeably and Sarham said of his own accord, "The house we have here is nice. It's roomy."

"Roomy?"

"I'm used to cities."

"This is a city."

"I mean I'm used to apartments," said Sarham. He said it a bit haltingly, like he'd suddenly lost some of his fluency in Ibyabekan. Or maybe, somehow, there was some sort of secret related to Sarham's history of living in apartments that he was supposed to keep a secret for some reason, but Kyeo couldn't imagine what it might be. Kyeo let it go. He wasn't supposed to be a particularly aggressive spy, was his understanding, just an opportunistic one if he happened to have an opportunity to get Sarham drunk or piece together non-drunk careless remarks.

"Most everyone in Ibyabek lives in a house," Kyeo said, "because we're a rich planet -"

Sarham made a cough-like noise.

"Are you okay?" Kyeo asked.

"I'm fine. Go on."

"- but some people have apartments too if they need an extra residence because they travel a lot for work," Kyeo finished, knitting his brow. Were all his conversations with Sarham going to be like this? "A pairmate I had in school sometimes lived in one, in Peninsula City, when his father brought his family along for longer business trips there. I went once," he added, so it wouldn't seem like hearsay; he was quite confident the apartment existed, but it didn't sound very convincing if he were just repeating a classmate's assertion.

"Oh, what was it like?" asked Sarham.

This seemed pretty rude to Kyeo, like Sarham was trying to make it really obvious that Kyeo hadn't been there at all, but maybe people

were rude as a matter of habit on United Kular planets. Kyeo took a breath and replied, "Oh, it was lovely, but you probably got a look at it yourself on your shuttle flight down."

"We flew by the peninsula, yeah." There was a pause. "I bet the view of the night sky is incredible on Ibyabek."

"It is!" said Kyeo. "If we let my father know we can probably go out and have a look, it should be dark now."

"Sure," said Sarham, grinning broadly, and Kyeo was relieved that he'd found a conversation topic that got a smile instead of odd pauses.

Kyeo jogged up the stairs, glancing down every few steps to see if Sarham was trying to wander off unsupervised but finding him every time sitting patiently on the bench, and found Suor in the social tangle talking to a film director and a general. Kyeo had to wait, trying not to rock back and forth between his heels and his toes, for a few minutes before there was enough of a break in the discussion of an incipient hurricane for his father to acknowledge him.

"What is it?" Suor asked. "Where's the ambassador's boy?"

"Downstairs." Kyeo didn't elaborate that he hadn't cared for the smoke; all three men had cigarettes lit at the moment. "He's not going anywhere. Can we go outside to look at the stars? They don't have a good view on his planet."

"Fine," said Suor. "Don't go too far. The pier, at most."

"The pier," nodded Kyeo. "Thank you, Father."

Suor nodded and turned his attention back to his companions. Kyeo trotted back downstairs. "Father says it's all right. We should be able to see all right from the pier."

"There's a pier?" asked Sarham.

"Sure there's a pier. Why wouldn't there be a pier?" Kyeo asked, leading the way to the door.

"I didn't think there were a lot of... boats," said Sarham vaguely.

"I'm not sure if there will be any boats, but we don't need any boats, just to go out on the water far enough that the buildings aren't in the way of the sky," replied Kyeo. They had a six-block walk to the water, and Kyeo cut through the park instead of past the cannery; it was more scenic. "I know how to find Stella Kular and Caeruleus Kular, but they're in our winter stars, it won't be out tonight. I can show you Xeren's star and Olach's though, they're in the same constellation as each other."

"What's the constellation called?"

"Glorious Leader's Eye," said Kyeo.

Sarham didn't say anything else for the rest of the walk. It was a nice night, almost cloudless, warm in the moments between breezes and cool when they blew. There was a streetlight on every corner, and they were on tonight, so their eyes couldn't adjust very much until they got to the shore.

They walked out to the end of the pier. Kyeo sat, and Sarham followed suit only to flop backwards onto the wood. Kyeo was concerned about the state of his borrowed clothes and refrained, though he was tempted. Slowly, more and more stars faded into view; the closest streetlamp was blocked from view by a sign on a building and of the other two nearby lamps one was burned out and the other smashed. There was no moon. Nobody in their houses had lights on, and there were no boats tied to the dock with their own lights either. The Glorious Leader's Eye became visible, and then the Five Virtues, the Dancing Woman, the Scallion - Kyeo only knew the most famous constellations, because though he hoped to fly ships

one day constellations were not actually of much use in navigating space. They were too relative, too deceptive.

He pointed. "There's the Glorious Leader's Eye. Xeren is the almost reddish star at the top eyelid, with one star very close to it on the left and the next one on the right farther away."

"I see it," said Sarham.

"Olach is the one near the pupil of the eye on the upper right."

"The kind of little one?"

"Yeah."

"Is it just a coincidence they're both in the Eye?"

"Do they not teach you astronomy? It's only sort of a coincidence; they're both very far from Ibyabek but in about the same direction. I guess one or the other of them could be in a different constellation if we'd named them differently, but that one really looks like an eye."

"Yeah, I can see where that came from. The stars are lovely here."

"Your planet must be too polluted," guessed Kyeo.

"- yeah," said Sarham. "There's places you can go to see our stars but it's a whole production, you can't just walk down the block. It's. Too polluted."

"Is it nice not to wear a particle mask all the time?"

"...yes. I prefer not to wear a particle mask all the time," agreed Sarham.

"I wonder how long your family is staying."

"Even if my father works here for a long time I might not stay that long. I'll need to go back to school."

"We have school here."

"I know, but... I'm expected back at a school in Kular."

"Hmph," said Kyeo. It didn't seem quite right that someone like Sarham could get so close to a real education and not be able to get one. "When?"

"I can stay six months, if that makes sense, but I can also leave early and stay with my aunt and uncle if my parents stay behind."

"Why'd they bring you in the first place?" wondered Kyeo. If Sarham wouldn't be going to school here, couldn't stay very long, had an uncle who'd take him in, what was the point?

"...uh," said Sarham, "so they would get to see me and so I could travel?"

Kyeo didn't see his father more than once most years since he'd started high school, and sometimes saw only his father and not his mother, depending on where they managed to see one another. "But you're my age."

"Yes, but they're still my parents... is that not normal here?"

"Most people our age are in school, or even have regular work already," said Kyeo. "Some of them are even already engaged. They don't have time to be visiting their parents all the time." Maybe some people wound up on the same work projects as their parents, or had parents who were teachers, but otherwise it would be unbearably babyish to rush home to visit for no reason.

"Engaged? This young?" said Sarham. "I don't know anybody our age back home who's engaged already."

"Well, if you wait too long you won't be able to have many children," said Kyeo. "Since women get less fertile over time. I only have one sister, no other siblings, and this is a little embarrassing for my parents, though they married when they were -" He did the arithmetic. "Twenty."

"Oh. You want children?"

"Everyone wants children," said Kyeo. "No one would want to be a dead end. When I'm in university I'll probably get introduced to my friends' sisters and things like that till I find someone to marry." He had vague hopes that his classmate Imyu's little sister would be a lot like Imyu; he thought he'd get along with someone just like him and be happy living in a house with another Imyu for a long time.

"I don't think I want children," said Sarham. "I guess I might change my mind."

"Why would you even think you wouldn't want them?" asked Kyeo. "What else are you going to do?"

"I might want to have a really demanding career?" said Sarham. He said it like a question even though it wasn't; Kyeo chalked it up to his accent.

"But you'd have a wife," said Kyeo.

"Maybe my... wife would also have a really demanding career," said Sarham. "Anyway, if I were going to have kids I'd want to be able to spend a lot of time with them even if somebody else had all the time they strictly needed."

"Why would you want to spend a lot of time with them?" wondered Kyeo. "Raising kids is the mother's job, and you're a man."

"I... just don't see the point of having them if you're not going to enjoy them," said Sarham. "I guess if you marry some girl who likes

them a lot and don't mind having kids you barely see that's... fine if the kids don't mind never seeing you."

"It wouldn't be *never*, but I'd have a job and she wouldn't. It's not like I don't know who my father is."

"If that works for you. You have a sister, you said?"

"Just one. Older sister," said Kyeo. "She's married, I haven't seen her in a while."

"She doesn't - write or anything?"

"I don't get mail at school. Maybe she writes to Mother, I'm not sure."

It was hard to see Sarham's face in the dark, but the quality of the silence was such that Kyeo felt it was important to make out that invisible expression, to divine what Sarham was thinking. What weird planet did Sarham live on that sucked men's attention into babies and tried to squeeze women into jobs? No wonder they were weak. He couldn't see much by the starlight. Sarham's eyes might have been envious or only confused.

Kyeo went on, "So does it usually work the other way in United Kular? The men watch the children and the women have jobs?"

"It's more complicated than that," said Sarham. "I don't really know quite how I'm supposed to explain it."

"Supposed to?"

"- I don't want to make a diplomatic faux pas. We're here as diplomats, and even though Father's the one who has the actual training and job title I don't want to do anything to sabotage that."

"I'm not a diplomat."

"I know. I just don't know all the things you know about how it's all right to talk around here."

"If you say so."

They relaxed on the dock without further words for a few long minutes. In the distance a bird called. At length, Sarham said, "I want to go see if the party's wrapped up enough that we can go to bed now."

"All right. I can show you back," said Kyeo, rolling up to his feet. "I think sometimes these go late, but I don't know if they'll make you and your mother stay for the whole thing."

"That makes sense," Sarham said, following down the pier and onto the street. "- Do people bike around here? I haven't seen a lot of cars, just a handful."

"Bikes are obsolete since the car was invented," blinks Kyeo. "I don't think I've ever seen one."

"I have a bike," said Sarham.

"Oh, dear," said Kyeo. Poor Sarham. Wasn't a diplomat's son important enough to get picked up and dropped off where he needed to go?

"I like it," Sarham added. "Biking, I mean. A lot of people have bikes in Kular."

"That's good then."

"Can you drive?" Sarham asked.

There was something Kyeo wasn't sure he liked about the question, like Sarham thought he already knew the answer and thought it proved something. It was uncomfortable.

Kyeo lied. "Of course. I drove down here from school. I take a school elective on how to drive a bus, since that's different, but soon I'll be able to do that too."

"You're going to be a bus driver?" asked Sarham, sounding surprised.

"No, no, it might come up when I join the military," said Kyeo. "Buses to transport other soldiers and equipment and stuff."

"Oh," said Sarham, softly.

They reached the party venue. They went up the stairs and sifted through the crowd for whichever father turned up first. They found Umi, who was sitting at the border of the party, sipping a drink and having somehow convinced a Morale Corps girl to sit with her even though she wasn't part of their target audience, and she was able to direct them to her husband. He was having a light, inconsequential conversation about the quality of the hors d'oeuvres which he was happy to suspend to give his son a hug - Kyeo was embarrassed for Sarham - and agree that they could go back to their guest house in fifteen minutes, giving them time to circulate and make their goodbyes politely enough.

"I'll see you in the morning," Kyeo smiled at Sarham.

"Yeah," Sarham smiled back. "See you in the morning."

Kyeo stayed at the party until his father left it, at well after midnight, he didn't know exactly how late. He managed to get out of his borrowed clothes, once he'd staggered up to his childhood room after the festivities, but that was all. He tipped over into bed and slept like the dead until the sun poured through the holes in the curtains and he couldn't close his eyes hard enough to fend off the spots of warmth it made on his bare skin.

He allowed himself five breaths - no one was demanding that he be up yet - then rolled to his feet and stretched, arms and legs and back, and padded to the bathroom for a shower. The water was warm; he stayed in the spray till he heard his mother Yuin's knock, and then got out of her way, wrapped in a towel.

Assuming his father would tell him if he had to wear something in particular, Kyeo put on one of his school uniforms; everything in the closet, if his mother hadn't already given it to friends with younger sons, was from years back and would no longer fit. He didn't even have his work clothes from the time he'd made bricks, those had been returned to the foreman when he went back to school.

At breakfast, which Yuin had laid out before soliciting the shower, there was real butter for the bread and two poached eggs, one each for Kyeo and Suor on the plates at each of their places at the table. Maybe she'd eaten hers already, maybe there'd only been two in the house; whichever it was, Kyeo ate his egg on his bread happily. The butter and the yolk soaked into the crumb all bright and yellow, rendering the texture less stale and more puddingy. There wasn't a vegetable in sight, but there was a dish of dried apples, not portioned out, in the middle of the kitchen table; Kyeo munched to fill up, not knowing when to expect lunch.

Suor appeared, nodded to Kyeo, and ate his egg and bread and butter but declined the apples. Probably Yuin had gotten a thirty pound sack of dried apples at the market months ago and Suor was sick of them now. Kyeo smoothed out a wrinkle in his sleeve only to immediately see it reappear when he bent his elbow again, but even drawing attention to his uniform didn't prompt a command to wear something else, so that was probably all right. Suor drained a cup of water.

Kyeo glanced at the place where Aipen used to sit on the fourth side of the table. "Have you heard from her?" he asked. He didn't have to specify.

"I saw her husband last month when I was in Rukei Valley," Suor replied. "He mentioned she was well. Aipen doesn't need her baby brother fretting about her, Kyeo. She has a husband now."

"We'll meet her children when she has them," Kyeo decided. He didn't know if they'd actually have a chance to do that. He was not sure, off the top of his head, if he'd met every uncle he had on his father's side, let alone his mother's. But it would have sounded pathetic to bid for reassurance that he'd know his nieces and nephews at least to the minimal degree of photos and names. Better to announce confidently that what he wanted was already so, and then save face with silence if it didn't turn out that way, as though the prediction were never made.

Suor didn't undermine the statement. He did say, "Are you going to track down your fifth cousins next? Glorious Leader and the People are there if you need anything, you don't need to rely on Stone Age kinship bonds for your needs now that we have civilization and a real philosophy of interdependence. They aren't teaching you well at school."

"I -" Kyeo was about to say something self-deprecating, blame himself and not his teachers; of course they'd talked about primitive social safety nets and how they'd been supplanted. Suor interrupted him.

"You're going to go with Sarham to the Museum of Fine Art. The parents will not be accompanying you; they have a meeting elsewhere on the planet. You may take him somewhere else appropriate if he becomes bored with the museum, but your judgment will need to be at its best, of course."

"Yes sir," said Kyeo.

"I will have you driven to the house, and you will also be driven to the museum, where you will also be collected. If you leave the

museum, circle back to it around sundown so you and Sarham will be able to join us for dinner."

"Yes, Father."

Kyeo got into the car when it arrived - it might have been the same one, with the same driver, that had taken him home from school, though he hadn't gotten a good look at the chauffeur's face last time so couldn't confirm it now without asking and wasn't curious enough to make such an inane remark.

Pedestrians parted when they heard the car coming and they were soon out of the neighborhood where the Sebe Luk household stood and venturing away from the city. There were shabbier houses, and a bridge over the river, and then farms, and then, between an orchard and a stretch of land that didn't seem to be planted with anything except wild scrub and little trees, there was a miniature village. The houses were full-sized, but there were only eight of them, each in a charmingly distinct shape and color and each with a garden in front. A gardener, some middle-aged man with sun-browned skin and a wide straw hat, was pruning a hedge. On the porch of a different house, a woman was sitting on a porch swing with a book open, swaying back and forth. A third house's front walkway was being doodled densely in chalk by a pigtailed girl about eleven years old. The houses stood in a semicircle, and in the center of the semicircle there was a store; Kyeo couldn't see its interior through the tinted windows of the limo, but the baskets out front had fresh fruit and what looked like spices and candy on the left, and a display of various electronics on the right.

The car stopped at the fifth house in the row. Kyeo got out. The car idled in the road.

Kyeo knocked.

Presently the door swung open and there was Sarham, smiling at him. "Hi, Kyeo!"

"Hi!" Kyeo replied.

"This is where they have us staying," said Sarham, gesturing not at the house behind him but at the microvillage around it. "What do you think?"

What a weird question. What did he think? Of the village? "It's pretty," Kyeo replied. "Do you buy groceries in the store or are they providing those separately?"

"They have us getting them in the store. Without paying for them. It's not what we're used to," said Sarham. "Come in -"

Kyeo stepped in. "I mean, necessities are free on Ibyabek," he said. "And food's a necessity."

"So you don't pay for food?"

"Of course not," Kyeo said. This was even true, considering Kyeo alone - at school and on work assignments meals were provided, at home his mother did the shopping. She probably sometimes picked up government sack of flour, but things like the dried apples, let alone the eggs, he assumed she paid for with real money in the marketplace. Then again, the Sebe Luks were rich. It was hardly impossible to live on free groceries and lots of people did it at least some of the time.

"Huh," said Sarham, thoughtful. He showed Kyeo to a couch against the living room window and plopped onto it. He patted the seat beside him.

Kyeo almost went to join him but then his sense of responsibility intervened. "I've got a car waiting outside," it sounded better if he said it like that, like he commanded the presence of the car, "to take us to the Museum of Fine Art today, if you're amenable, Sarham."

"Oh. Yes, I'm amenable," Sarham said, hopping up again. "Am I dressed right for it?"

"You're fine," said Kyeo, looking him up and down. Sarham was wearing his own Kularan clothes, layered to Ibyabekan standards of modesty. They looked expensive and well-maintained and that was all Kyeo could discern about the formality level, so he expected nobody else would be very likely to take issue. The summery fabric followed Sarham's outline closely enough that Kyeo could tell he didn't do a lot of physical labor; any muscle there was deliberately placed with exercise, not a practical necessity. Offplanet idleness translated into a sort of exotic softness that some Morale Corps girls and almost no boys displayed within Ibyabek. "You look nice," Kyeo added.

"Thanks," said Sarham. "- are you wearing a uniform?"

"My school uniform," acknowledged Kyeo.

"Isn't school out of session?"

"My other clothes don't fit any more."

"You don't have downtime during school where you can wear other things?"

Kyeo blinked. "Why? - Let's go out to the car."

Sarham let Kyeo lead him into the back of the limo, and they drove the rest of the way around the circle of street that formed the village. The gardener had moved to another section of the garden, but the girl with the chalk was doggedly scrubbing her designs away, and the lady on the porch was still rocking, still intent on her book. "Why what?" asked Sarham, once they were sitting in the backseat.

"Why would I change clothes in the middle of the day for no reason? We change for gym, but otherwise uniforms are fine for everything."

"To..." Sarham trailed off, like he'd never really thought about it before. "I've just never worn a uniform all day long before and don't think I'd like it. Is it more comfortable than it looks?"

"It's fine," said Kyeo. "It isn't like we can go around naked."

Sarham went inexplicably pink in the cheeks. "I suppose not, but some clothes are comfier - or just more you."

"What do you mean, more me?"

"In - do you watch movies -"

"Sometimes, sure."

"In movies the actors wear all different clothes so you can tell who they are, right?"

"Sure, but I don't need to always be sure to wear a white and crimson color palette so I can be recognized easily in crowd scenes," laughed Kyeo.

Sarham giggled. "No, but like, if somebody's always wearing a hat, or their socks don't match, or their clothes are a little too small on them, that tells you something about them - or if they're dressed like some profession -"

"I'm dressed like a student. I am one," Kyeo pointed out.

"Yeah. I guess so. Maybe we're the weird ones," said Sarham.

"What weird Kularan things do you do with clothes?"

"A lot of schools don't even have uniforms, kids just go in whatever they want as long as it's not... printed with swear words or something," Sarham answered.

"...printed with swear words?"

"Yeah, we have to save those for after school," Sarham said, winking.

"You're making this up," Kyeo said.

"I'm honestly not! I don't have any profane clothing personally but I have friends who do. I'm usually in, like, long shirts with color gradients, and this kind of pants that clings to your legs that's popular lately and way more comfortable than they look - I left all that stuff home, my father didn't think we'd have a lot of chances to wear informal outfits, so this is the sort of thing I'd usually wear to a dance or the theater or something."

"I had school uniforms and gym clothes, and I used to have a couple event outfits but I've outgrown it. I was borrowing what I was wearing last night from my father, I might get new things if there's more parties like that we go to. There are... popular pants?"

"Yeah, there are. Doesn't *anyone* here get to like... wear pants that are in fashion?"

"Some people don't wear uniforms, but I think they just wear whatever's practical." Whatever was cheap, whatever was given away, whatever would stand up to their work assignments. "I wouldn't have the first idea how to pick my clothes - maybe the sorts of things my father wears to parties are like you're thinking but he's never talked to me about it."

"Huh," said Sarham. "Does the art museum have textiles at all?"

Kyeo had never been. "I've only looked at the paintings before," he said, confident there would be enough paintings to while away a hypothetical visit he might have made in the past. "We can look at any departments you like once we're there."

When they arrived it transpired they'd been assigned a tour guide, a girl who might be Morale Corps but wasn't admitting to it at the

moment. She touched Sarham's arm whenever she spoke. They followed her through halls of sculpture, walking slowly so she could talk about each one.

"There aren't any plaques," Sarham remarked, when they moved from the first room to the second.

"Plaques?"

"In museums I've seen before they write down all the stuff she's saying, so you don't need a tour guide."

"That must put a lot of tour guides out of jobs," said Kyeo.

"I think that's not how jobs work," says Sarham. "It frees up people who would have been tour guides to go do something else, is maybe how my mother would put it. Or it frees up the money the museum would pay them but maybe museums here don't work that way."

"How your *mother* would put it?"

"She knows about jobs and things like that - there's a word for the subject but I don't know the Ibyabekan for it. She's the one I'd ask, I don't know that my father would have anything interesting to say about tour guides."

"I'd tell you the word if it came to mind," said Kyeo, who had no idea what Sarham was talking about or why anyone considered tour guide employment to be an important subject to teach the women of United Kular.

"Thanks. I like this one," Sarham added of a painting showing some farmland from high altitude, turning his attention back to their neglected tour guide who did not appear herself to know the word for the topic of her trade, or at least didn't consider it within the scope of her duties to supply it. "Did the artist sketch it out from a helicopter or something?"

"Yes, of course," beamed the tour guide. Kyeo had never seen a helicopter and if he'd had to guess he would have guessed the artist was working from a map, but maybe it had been a helicopter. If Sarham preferred to imagine a giant government vehicle being used for something that frivolous there was no harm done in letting him think it. The tour guide went on about the painter and his supposed helicopter ride and pointed out another painting in the room by the same man.

Sarham was quiet for the next several rooms of art. "Do you like these?" Kyeo asked him, when they came to a set of metal sculptures, abstractly twisted around themselves, titled things like "Historic Settling of Ibyabek" and "Right Philosophy" and "Glorious Leader Salutes the People".

"They're -" began Sarham, and after a delay he concluded, "nice."

"Art must be very different on Kular," said Kyeo.

"It is. - how are you thinking it'd be different, specifically?"

"Well, everyone has to pay for everything they need to live, so probably you don't have very many artists," Kyeo replied. "Because who will pay for art when they need their money just not to starve, or to be seen in the hospital if they're sick? And the artists can't do it without being paid, because they need food and medicine too, so probably there is almost no art."

"Huh," said Sarham, almost more of a breath than a response. "Well, there are art museums anyway."

"Maybe they fill them up with Ibyabekan art, since our artists don't have to worry they're going to starve," speculated Kyeo. "I think sometimes we give other planets art objects as diplomatic gifts, do you know if Kular has any?"

"I don't know," said Sarham. "I suppose Father might know. I haven't been to every art museum in Kular."

"You don't travel much?"

"- well, not enough to have been to every art museum in Kular, at any rate." The tour guide kept touching Sarham's arm. Sarham kept taking steps away from her whenever this wouldn't take him directly backwards on their route through the halls.

They'd seen several wings of the museum after a few hours, and then the limousine took them to lunch. The restaurant had two other occupied tables, one with a couple and their nine-year-old daughter, one a group of older men. The waitress (was she also Morale Corps? Kyeo had never run into so many probable Morale Corps members in a row before) seated them by the window, not close to the other diners.

Sarham was frowning at his menu.

"Do you not like this kind of food?" Kyeo asked. He wasn't sure he'd be able to gracefully pull off a relocation to another restaurant, they probably weren't all prepared for diplomatic visits even insofar as this qualified. Maybe the chauffeur would have an idea if Kyeo ducked out to ask him.

"I'm not a picky eater," Sarham said, "I'm just not as good at reading Ibyabekan as I am at speaking. There isn't a lot to read in Ibyabekan when you're studying the language in Kular."

"Why not?" wondered Kyeo. "We write plenty of books and share them with everyone so they can pick up some right philosophy and so on."

"Well - yes," said Sarham. "I'm sure it would take a really long time to read all the books published on Ibyabek. I guess what I mean is - I don't know the word I'm missing. Do you have a word for a

particular kind of book, or kind of music, or kind of anything really, where people have tastes between the different kinds?"

"Not off the top of my head."

"Then I guess the easiest way to put it is that I didn't happen to run across Ibyabekan books I liked very much and wasn't sure how to find ones I'd like more," said Sarham. "They all seemed sort of... alike. The movies were more fun, but didn't teach me to read. So I'm having to sound out everything on the menu."

"If you're not picky I could just choose something for you," Kyeo offered.

"Oh - yes, if you don't mind, that would be easier, though I should probably read through this for practice anyway," said Sarham.

"Of course," said Kyeo. He skimmed the menu and flagged down the waitress and ordered Sarham a rack of lamb with rice, and himself pigs' trotters and potatoes. "I hope you're hungry," he mentioned, when he gestured that the girl shouldn't take Sarham's menu, "the desserts look good too."

"I'll probably have managed to read that far by the time we're meant to order some," said Sarham.

"Who'd you learn to speak Ibyabekan from?" Kyeo asked.

"Oh, I had a tutor. The tutor was from - Outer Sohaibek, but the language hasn't diverged that much, so a few conversation partners who had - been to Ibyabek before got me the important differences in dialect even without full time tutoring."

Kyeo wondered at the pauses, but probably Sarham was just fumbling for words, and if they didn't seem to Kyeo that they were the sort of words that would be hard to remember at Sarham's fluency that was probably just his ignorance from never having had

to operate in a second language. Probably Kyeo would be forgetting the words for bread and the sky and so on, now and then.

Their food arrived very quickly, and while Sarham looked a little puzzled at his first bite of rice, it was Kyeo's most appealing meal in recent memory; the meat was rich and the potatoes were smooth and none of it was dried or pickled. "Is your food to your liking?" Kyeo asked, when he couldn't resist asking any more.

"Oh, it's - good." Surely "good" was not a very advanced vocabulary word but maybe Sarham was reaching for shades of meaning he didn't know how to express in Ibyabekan. "Do you want to trade half of mine for half of yours? I'm not used to this style of rice, I think."

They exchanged meal-halves and Sarham seemed better pleased with the potatoes; Kyeo, indifferent, let him have it all and took the rest of the rice. It seemed fine to him. "How do they do rice on Kular?"

"It comes out softer," said Sarham. "There aren't many people eating here, are there?"

"Probably it's work hours for most people in the area."

"Then why is the restaurant open at this time at all?"

"Maybe they were asked to stay open an extra hour," guessed Kyeo, "specifically for us - you're an important guest, of course. Or maybe it's not work hours, it's that people are hanging back to avoid crowding you."

"I suppose that's why the museum was so empty, too."

"Was it? I don't know how full museums should be."

"It seemed like it to me but it's harder to tell, when there aren't tables and chairs standing empty," Sarham replied. "Slow day."

"Yes," Kyeo agreed.

They ordered dessert - Sarham had indeed read through the entire menu by then and wanted pumpkin custard, and Kyeo got flan, and they tasted but didn't outright trade from each other's plates. Kyeo had to attend to himself very carefully to keep from wolfing down his entire flan in a wretchedly inappropriate manner. Sarham didn't seem to be having that problem, which Kyeo imagined had to do with diplomatic training. Perhaps he'd been drilled on behaving with desserts after fasting all day long or something outlandish like that.

Kyeo toyed with asking, but didn't, and instead let Sarham ask him questions about his school - did they play thus and such sports, did they cover thus and such math? - and replied as properly as he knew how, with some exaggeration of his personal skill at both math and sports but an accurate rendition of what they covered in gym lest he be called upon to prove it. If he were prevailed upon to play ball with Sarham he could hardly object to the requirement and had better not turn up ignorant of a claimed curriculum. Kyeo considered it less likely that he was about to be quizzed on calculus.

Sarham did not whip out any such test. They finished their desserts - Kyeo timed things so his last bite began just a moment after Sarham's did. They climbed back into the limousine to return to the museum for the rest of their tour. The same guide met them and conducted them through the remaining sections of the tour.

"Are you all right?" Kyeo asked them, as they passed through a room with a water feature clad in elaborate tiles. Sarham had barely said a word, seemed to be all out of questions.

"I'm fine," said Sarham. "Just - I'm fine."

"All right," said Kyeo, but he didn't miss Sarham's glance at their beaming guide.

The limousine carried them to the same restaurant again after their museum tour was over. As he'd implied, Suor was there, with Yuin along at his elbow smiling at her son and at Sarham, and Mr. and Mrs. Peng were along too, the former clapping his son on the shoulder in greeting when they walked in. It was still quiet in the restaurant. There was a couple at another table toward the back, and an older man dining alone in a corner, but that was all.

Sarham didn't comment. He smiled back at Kyeo's parents and they all sat down; they weren't given menus, just a series of small plates brought in batches, removed as they emptied, for the six of them to share. Kyeo noticed that Sarham and his parents both helped themselves to pickles and bread even though there was meat and fruit and eggs and even fish to be had. They kept doing it even when it turned out that vegetables were replaced with more vegetables and rolls with more rolls. Maybe even those things were hard to come by in Kular for some reason; Kyeo knew that Ibyabek was fortunate in having particularly good growing conditions over most of the planet. He tried not to think about poor Sarham eating synthetic protein cubes or something awful like that back home.

Suor took charge of the conversation, keeping it light without straying into gratuitously insubstantial topics like the weather. He wanted to know what the boys thought of the art museum, whether the elder Pengs had had pleasant flights to and from their appointment, whether everyone had heard the Glorious Leader's latest public address. Everyone answered his questions in turn. Kyeo found himself with very little to say. While he was consistently able to manifest interest in what Sarham was inscrutably thinking, and didn't mind telling Sarham what was on his mind to the extent it was reasonable conversational material, Kyeo's father kept the conversation too firmly on his rails for it to be engaging. Fortunately with half a dozen people at the table he didn't have to say much to be doing his share of the talking, and if Sarham was quiet too, his diplomat father filled in for him just fine.

The limousine took all six of them back to the Pengs' guest house after they'd had dessert (a rich lemony cake that Kyeo was glad his mother had portioned for him, because he would have had serious trouble being restrained about it if he'd been serving). Suor and Wulaar were talking about the climate on the peninsula by the time they stepped out of the car.

"Kyeo?" said Sarham, hesitating to approach the house.

"Yes?" said Kyeo.

"Do you want to go for - a walk, out into the fields, is that okay?"

"It's fine," said Kyeo. He loped after Sarham, who ducked between two of the miniature village houses and struck out in a random direction over some relatively traversible native plants with that characteristic purplish blush to them. "Do you like taking walks?"

"I actually don't at home," said Sarham. "At home I have a bike, remember?"

"Right. Isn't it hard to ride? With only two wheels?"

"It took some getting used to but it's not hard any more. - I think my mother's not happy here. She might want to leave soon and take me."

"Will your father let her?" wondered Kyeo, bewildered.

Sarham looked over his shoulder at Kyeo. "Let her take me or let her leave at all?"

"Either."

"Yeah. He'll let her," said Sarham. "I guess he might try to convince her to stay if it's important but I'm not sure it is."

"But -" said Kyeo, maneuvering over a trickily uneven piece of ground, "- don't you want to stay?" Sarham didn't answer. The polite thing to do would be for Kyeo to pretend that he'd never asked the question, but it sat in the air, heavy between them. "Don't you like it here?" Sarham wasn't just overwhelmed by things being more beautiful and comfortable than he was used to, right, he'd seemed more even-keeled about it than that.

"I like some things about it," Sarham said eventually. "I like the - but there's - I think I'm having a better time than Mom."

"You keep stopping in the middle of talking," Kyeo said, which was *unspeakably* rude, but if Sarham was going to leave anyway -

"Yeah. I know." Kyeo hadn't been expecting Sarham to acknowledge it. Not only did he do that, he went on: "I got a lot of instructions about how to be polite here, and it's often really hard to think of anything polite to say. Especially since I don't like lying."

"You don't like *lying*?" Kyeo wasn't sure he'd heard right. It was like someone asserting they didn't like the sound of their own heartbeat.

"Well, I usually don't have to do it!" said Sarham, pressing his hands against the sides of his head. "I've been on eight planets and twenty continents and this is the first one where I have to lie all the time so I don't offend anyone! I'm not even actually supposed to tell you I've been that many places!"

"You're not going to offend me," said Kyeo, and he didn't even know if that was a lie, but he was suddenly, desperately, *searingly* curious to know what had been going through Sarham's mind in all those pauses, what Sarham wasn't saying in all those silences.

"Even if I'm not you're probably reporting on me to your father or somebody on anything I say," Sarham said, stopping in the middle of the field.

"No I'm not," replied Kyeo automatically, and Sarham answered him with a look so withering that Kyeo suddenly felt like no one had ever actually *looked* at him, ever before in his life, and this first occasion of being looked at was like plummeting off a cliff, surrounded only by air on all sides, nothing solid but himself and himself worryingly liquefied by Sarham's eyes.

Sarham's expression softened at something he saw in Kyeo's face. Kyeo swallowed what might have been an embarrassing gurgle.

With a sigh, Sarham reached out and - brushed his thumb over Kyeo's cheekbone. Kyeo experienced a sudden sympathy for anyone who didn't like the sound of their heartbeat. His was oppressively loud at the moment. "Wh-" he said.

"You had a bug on your face," said Sarham, coloring slightly.

"Oh," said Kyeo stupidly.

"It's not your fault," said Sarham.

"Having a bug on my -"

"You didn't have a bug on your face. Sorry. Getting too used to lying."

"- *not* having a bug on -"

"It's not your fault that you're reporting to your father or that you're lying about it," said Sarham. "It's not your fault that I don't like it here. I like *you*, it's just - it isn't your fault."

Kyeo was no longer entirely clear on what this conversation was about. He put his hand on his cheek where Sarham had touched it as though to feel for a bug bite.

"Sorry," Sarham said again. "I shouldn't have."

"I don't mind," said Kyeo.

"I'd still appreciate it if you didn't mention it to your father. - I mean, if that won't get you in trouble. I don't want to get you in trouble."

"I can tell him I had a bug on my face. If he was looking out the window with binoculars, which he wasn't," said Kyeo rashly.

Sarham glanced back at the village. He tromped out farther across the field, and Kyeo followed him.

They walked for another ten minutes in silence.

When they'd gotten to an area with more trees, Kyeo spoke up. "Why doesn't your mother like it here?"

"She... well, she's not getting quite the same kind of hospitality I am, right, because she's a woman," said Sarham slowly. He found a fallen log and sat on it.

"...what, does she want to be a man?" Kyeo sat beside him after far too long dithering about how much space to leave between them.

"No. Uh, she wants - I don't know how to explain it."

"Is this about you thinking I'll tell my father?"

"Yes. But I also don't know how to explain it. Things are so different off Ibyabek in so many ways that it'd be hard to know where to start even if I could just trust you and not worry about it."

Kyeo wanted to tell Sarham he could trust him. But if he just said that Sarham would probably *look* at him again. And he couldn't say it would never get back to Suor, that it was safe, that it would never be a bad idea to tell Kyeo everything that went on in his head in all his quiet moments. It would be a lie. And Sarham would know

better, and probably he wouldn't pretend it was true even if Kyeo really really wanted him to.

"Sorry," said Sarham, when it had been too long with neither of them talking.

"It's -" What had Sarham said before. It had been a nice thing to say, like he might have *looked* at Kyeo but that didn't have to mean everything was ruined forever. "It's not your fault."

"Thanks," said Sarham.

They sat, watching the trees move in the wind, Kyeo wasn't sure how long. He tried to think of something to say that would be light and easy to talk about. His father was good at that when he was at work. His father would just chain from topic to topic, one minute finding metaphors in flower arrangements and in another meditating on the implications of the exact word choice in a philosophical maxim and the next learning his conversational partner's entire family tree even though none of those people would ever matter to him at all, filling the air, developing rapport, never offending and never giving away too much and never getting *looked at* .

"Do you mind if I sing?" Kyeo asked finally.

"You sing?" asked Sarham, sounding oddly delighted. "Go ahead - please -"

Kyeo was now somewhat concerned that Sarham was going to listen the same way he looked, but he'd gone and suggested it, so he followed through. The melody line to Anthem of the Bright Way was simple but had room for flourishes, if you were singing alone and wouldn't disrupt the group, so he added little figures in the middles of lines, showing off.

When he came to the end of the last verse Sarham was smiling at him. Kyeo smiled back, a reflex that belied how he felt about the

matter - or maybe it didn't belie it, Kyeo didn't know because he couldn't identify the feeling. The nice thing about not caring much about lying was not needing to aggressively identify the truth. "You like it?" he asked, sounding too quiet, but there weren't many other sounds out in the woods, probably Sarham could hear him.

"If I sort of - pretend I don't speak Ibyabekan and let the lyrics just be sounds - I love it," says Sarham.

"What's wr- should I not ask what's wrong with the lyrics -"

"You shouldn't ask what's wrong with the lyrics. Sorry," said Sarham. "Would you sing another one?"

Kyeo sang another one, and another one, and another, and he was running out of songs he knew all the words to but Sarham was still smiling at him. Kyeo broke out a song he'd made up himself when he was thirteen, stumbled through it quickly, hoped Sarham wasn't trying to interpret the lyrics to discover that they were about getting a plum for his birthday. It was a stupid thing to write a song about, it had just been a very good plum. Then he remembered how to begin *Stars of Ibyabek* and sang that, and then he noticed that Sarham had scooted closer along the log. Their hands were almost touching.

Kyeo observed that, and then kept observing it, and then stared some more, as though written explanations would appear across their knuckles any moment, or -

"Sorry," said Sarham, standing up suddenly.

"- what for -" said Kyeo, lost.

"You're - I shouldn't - you didn't exactly *decide* to be here, right, you have an assignment, and also I think here it might actually be - never mind the details, just, I'm sorry, I'll get ahold of myself."

"I like this assignment," said Kyeo defensively.

"That's -" Sarham struggled with something privately for a moment; Kyeo watched it happen on his face, but like the lyrics of the anthem it didn't resolve into meaning. "I'm glad," he said finally. "That you don't mind hanging out with me."

"I like you," Kyeo told him.

"I'm glad," Sarham murmured.

"It's not just that I'm comparing to last summer making bricks -"

" *Making bricks* ?"

"- well, someone has to, that's what I did last school break."

It occurred belatedly to Kyeo that this was not one of the things he was supposed to say, it didn't have the right tone to it - even if he'd never been given a list of things he was forbidden to mention, he usually had a sense for it, and the sense had failed him. He wouldn't have forgotten about that if Sarham had just asked him what he'd been doing last summer. If Sarham had asked him what he'd been doing last summer, he would have said he hung out with his friends and went to the movies a lot and threw a holiday party. But scrambling to clarify that Sarham had more than lackluster competition in his favor had silenced the alarm that told him what things were and were not showing off Ibyabek to best advantage.

Sarham was looking at him again, with a sort of urgent sadness, and Kyeo's gaze flinched down at his own knees, not sure how to bear it.

It was growing dark. "We might trip if we wait too much longer to walk back," Sarham said, looking up through the leaves of the trees.

"All right," said Kyeo.

They stood up and started toward the village, both watching their feet as though very concerned about stepping in burrows or stumbling over stones. "What's making bricks like?" asked Sarham softly.

"It's fine, and now whenever I see a brick building I wonder if I helped. You get clay all over yourself though," said Kyeo. And he'd seen someone break a toe dropping a brick on it, but he was paying attention to what came out of his mouth, now, so he didn't say that.

"Huh," breathed Sarham.

They entered the guest house, wiped their feet at the door. Suor glanced at them, then over the next minute steered the conversation among the adults from something about native Ibyabekan birds to the late hour, and motioned for Kyeo to come with him, when they'd been excused for the evening. Suor put his hand on Kyeo's shoulder to steer him out.

In the car, there was silence. Kyeo couldn't think of anything to say, and Suor apparently didn't care to - Kyeo wouldn't believe that he couldn't; if nothing else he could have summarized whatever Kyeo had missed about native birds.

The chauffeur let them out at the Sebe Luk home. When Kyeo tried the lightswitch on the way in it didn't work; Suor fetched a candle. "Son," he said, as Kyeo was about to slip up the stairs rather than sit up by candlelight, "stay a minute."

"Yes, Father?"

"On philosophically troubled planets," Suor said after a hesitation, "there's a common malady, one you probably haven't heard of - Ibyabekan doctors know how to manage it and it so seldom appears when children are raised right. But your new pairmate hasn't had those advantages."

"- I haven't noticed him being sickly," said Kyeo. Slender, but just like he didn't do physical work much, not like he was wasting away. Dark, a little, but not so much so that Kyeo would have completely missed it if he were flushed with fever or wan with fatigue.

"Not physically. It's a philosophical issue, not a physical one," said his father. "Of course, I'm not a doctor myself. I may be mistaking something else for the condition. But if I'm not, then it represents a unique opportunity for you."

"If Sarham is sick, shouldn't we take him to a hospital?"

"His parents wouldn't allow it," said Suor. "They're suspicious of anything they haven't paid for, foreigners, they'd make an incident of it. It's not likely to kill him, you needn't be too worried."

"Father, what do you think he *has* ?"

"I suspect," replied Suor, "that he's interested in -" he waved a hand with a vague gesture Kyeo had never seen him make, "the simulation of a sort of mock marital relationship with boys, insofar as that's possible, and he's gotten confused by the pairmate arrangement. It'll rattle his judgment if you encourage that a bit, and he may tell you things as though in confidence."

Kyeo took an embarrassingly long time to decipher what *that* meant. "En...courage... him?" he asked haltingly. Encourage him how - encourage him to do *what* , and how much of it, and -

"I didn't promise you an easy assignment," said Suor sharply. "Intelligence from United Kular could be essential to the continued survival of Ibyabek. Not everything done to protect our home planet is comfortable, you may as well learn that now and not in military training later on."

"I - I'm sorry, Father, I didn't mean to complain," said Kyeo, abashed, cheeks burning, "I just -" He did not want, he realized, to

ask his father in exactly what way he was meant to encourage Sarham to conduct a mock marital relationship. "I think I follow you," he lied, he'd figure it out later, "is there anything specific that Ibyabek hopes to learn -"

"Outer Sohaibekan monitoring of their trojan asteroids," replied Suor. "What equipment and personnel they have on that. Whether United Kular is supplying or could be persuaded to supply Outer Sohaibek with weapons and materiel, ships and troops, or any other aid in the event of a shooting war. Developments in technology as relevant to the balance of power in our system. United Kular's alliance status with Outer Sohaibek, Xeren, Olach, anyone else he knows about. Any movements at the base on Riakebek - that's their big moon, not the little one."

Kyeo nodded at this list, nod nod nod over and over again like acknowledging an item would make it be the last one, but Suor went on; there was a great deal, it turned out, that Ibyabek wanted to know.

"And son," Suor said, finally, "this philosophical problem the Peng boy has. It may be catching. Keep an eye on yourself, but you can always go see a doctor about it later. As I said it isn't life-threatening."

"Yes, Father," said Kyeo.

"That's all. Good night," Suor told him, and Kyeo fled up the stairs.

Later, he lay awake in bed, turning over this terrifying conversation in his mind. Kyeo determined that it was apparently within his power to generate ideas of how to encourage Sarham. Once he'd managed to fall asleep, his brain continued to produce suggestions, each less plausible than the last, and when he woke up he was glad the water in the shower ran cold.

Kyeo and Sarham were sitting in the woods again. Kyeo had suggested it because he'd had, the previous night, a mortifying dream in which he'd fumbled an attempt at encouragement and a Morale Corps shopgirl had come over to show him how it was done. Mercifully, he'd forgotten the rest of the dream, but he was pretty sure none of it had taken place in the woods.

"How old is the terraforming around here?" Sarham asked, touching the bark of one of the larger trees.

"This part of the planet? A hundred years," said Kyeo. It was probably more than eighty, anyway. "There are younger parts where you wouldn't find trees this big but Bright City's the oldest settlement."

"Someday I want to go to Earth," said Sarham. "There's stuff that's thousands of years old there. Trees. Buildings."

None of Kyeo's ideas had begun with segueing from a conversation about how old things were on Earth of all places. In retrospect, he was probably going to have to work with something more like this than like finding a pond to fall in and having Sarham rescue him and finding it necessary afterwards to get out of their wet clothes "to dry off".

"You seem preoccupied," Sarham said, which was worse.

"I heard," said Kyeo, "that -" He could not finish this sentence with "that you have a philosophical problem". "That on Kular sometimes -" He'd *meant* to go on "boys kiss each other" but his father had not exactly said that, and lying about what he'd heard was fine but having some totally laughable misconception about what philosophically troubled boys got up to was not. Perhaps he had invented that in his own philosophically troubled brain and really boys on United Kular just did - he had no idea.

"Lots of things happen on Kular sometimes." Sarham tilted his head. Kyeo was staring at his mouth. Kyeo was trying to make up an alternative hearsay. On Kular they drink raindrops when their plumbing breaks rather than have it fixed out of public money. On Kular they translate all their imported movies so that there's Kularan propaganda added in. On Kular...

"Never mind," said Kyeo.

"On Kular," Sarham said after a pause, "we can get on the skylace and see all of it, whenever we want."

"I've seen the skylace," said Kyeo. They covered computer and skylace use in school. Kyeo had learned to get reading and listening material in Kularan Creole for his language class off a couple of sites, and for one term they'd had a system for submitting classwork that way but they went back to hard copy after that. He could look up pictures of wild mushrooms and native grasses and see if whatever he was looking at was all right to eat. There was some way to get music off it that Imyu had figured out but Kyeo hadn't gotten the hang of it, there were too many bypasses and things that if you clicked on them took you to the wrong place and logged an alert into the system. "What do you mean whenever you want?"

Sarham reached into his pocket and pulled out a glassy rectangle with ribbons of color on its back surface. "My parents brought backup lenses," he said. "In case theirs broke and they couldn't get, uh, Kularan-style replacement parts that would fit them, here. Since they need to be in touch with home sometimes."

Kyeo was too fascinated by the object to ask what was wrong with Ibyabekan electronics. Ibyabekan ones were plasticky and had more buttons and they were usually gray. This one looked like a white glass marble from a museum, rolled out flat and stretching its candy-pink streaks into pressed twists, and it wasn't even lit up yet. "So that isn't yours?"

"No, it's one of Mom's. I - wasn't supposed to bring my own lens. I thought it'd be fine, a lot of people miss the skylace awfully but I don't all that much, but - I took this one to show you."

"It's interesting," said Kyeo, instead of *It's beautiful* .

"I mean, the idea is you turn it on, not just look at it. I'm not sure I'll be able to get on the skylace from here," admitted Sarham. "It might want access codes or something." He tapped the surface of the rectangle with two fingers and the beribboned pattern was hidden by milk-white and a slowly turning image of a planet.

"Is that Kular?"

"Yeah."

The image changed, a geometric pattern of colors Kyeo couldn't interpret at all, and Sarham poked one, and it changed again, and Sarham said "Yep, it wants an Ibyabekan ID... sorry."

"I have an Ibyabekan ID."

"You don't think it'd get you in trouble?" Sarham asked, shying away a little, pulling back the lens.

"No," said Kyeo, already halfway through extemporizing an explanation for his father about how this was somehow "encouraging", and Sarham gave him the lens.

Kyeo's ID unlocked the skylace bobbin in orbit above them, and it spun them onto what must be the default Kularan site, a startlingly boring text box.

"What do you wanna see?" Sarham asked softly.

"I - don't know," said Kyeo. "What is there? What did you want to show me?"

Sarham looked at the empty text box. He put the lens down on his knee and looked up at the treetops. "I guess I was imagining there'd be a hundred things you already knew you wanted. Maybe there aren't. I watch movies, at home - and write messages to my friends - I order food sometimes, which will not work at all here -"

"Messages to your friends? About what?"

"Uh," said Sarham, and he picked up the lens again, went back to the geometrical display, poked a triangle, logged in to something. "I don't remember what I last talked to people about, but I can get my history..." Names in Kularan skated past under Sarham's fingertips. He chose one.

Kyeo could read the Kularan all right, though it was harder with a lot of the formal markers and particles they had in class material, and some of the words he didn't know at all, maybe derived from different pidgin source languages instead of the ones his textbooks marked as standard. He picked his way through it. Someone was asking Sarham *are you almost home* and Sarham replied *yes and he says he isn't* - there Kyeo didn't know the word - *so thank you very so extremely much my friendfriendfriendthing* except that last part was written with sarcastic-looking diacritics connecting all the different emphasis particles and various synonyms for "friend", to what was presumably some sort of rhetorical effect.

"What does the word mean there -" Kyeo began, but Sarham had swept the messages away, nearly dropping the lens in the process.

"Whoops," said Sarham in a high voice. "Uh you were asking what my friends and I talk about - I guess we talk about, uh, movies, and where we're going to meet, and how we're doing -"

"There was a word I didn't know," Kyeo said.

"Just one, uh, wow, your Kularan must be great," said Sarham, "do you want to switch to Kularan, we could practice -"

Kyeo looked at him. He wanted to back off, all his social instincts were telling him not to push on it, to let the deflection stand, but the substance of this snatch of organic Kularan conversation was eluding him without the word. He said neither yes nor no.

"My friend set me up with his cousin," said Sarham, collapsing a little under the silence. "The cousin wasn't interested, my friend made a mistake."

"Oh," said Kyeo, and then, "I see," and, "I have heard that on United Kular boys are sometimes that way but did not know the word."

"- is there an Ibyabekan word? I don't know one," murmured Sarham.

Kyeo shook his head, and then, as though falling, succumbing to some shift in gravity, he leaned forward, and he kissed Sarham.

Sarham made a little noise, a wonderful little noise Kyeo wanted foolishly to set to music, and kissed him back.

Apparently it was true that sometimes on Kular boys kissed other boys after all. Apparently also Kularan boys would sometimes put their hands on those other boys and pull them in closer, with their fingers interleaved with hair, clenching in fabric. Apparently boys from Kular were very rewarding to kiss.

Kyeo didn't know how long he had been experiencing this fascinating truth when Sarham pulled away, retracted his arms back into his lap. Kyeo leaned after him, caught himself, sat up straight. Sarham had his eyes clenched shut and his lips a little apart, like he was about to say something, but he didn't, for a long moment.

"Sarham?" said Kyeo, quietly. Sarham, are you okay - Sarham, what's wrong - Sarham, kiss me more -

"We can't," said Sarham.

"We just did," said Kyeo, almost indignant.

"We *mustn't*," clarified Sarham, "I, I, your dad told you to be here, you don't - you don't have -"

"I wanted to," Kyeo insisted. His father wasn't some kind of perfect anti-compass who would never tell him to do anything that he wanted to do. Later his father would send him to a hospital to be cured of his philosophical malady and Kyeo would probably want that too because by then Sarham would not be around to be encouraged any more.

"Maybe," said Sarham, whose eyes were still closed.

"Why won't you look at me?"

"If I look at you I'll kiss you again."

"You could just kiss me again," said Kyeo reasonably.

Sarham shook his head. "I - it's a bad idea - do you want to see anything on the skylace, I can't be sure I'll be able to swipe it again -"

Kyeo took the offered lens from Sarham, didn't check himself when he wanted to let his hand linger a moment in contact, but didn't escalate either. He looked, blankly, at the geometrical screen. Poked a circle inside a rectangle inside a square, and found a gallery of photographs. There were menu items, at the bottom of the screen, but Kyeo saw the first photograph and pushed it aside for the next and he never paid the buttons any mind.

Sarham and a dozen other people on some kind of open-topped car, descending a hill, arms flung up while water splashed around them and their mouths all opened in shrieks of delight. Sarham and a friend taking a picture of themselves on a bridge over a river, full of boats, reflecting a thousand lights from twin rows of buildings down

each side. Sarham with some little child on his shoulders, both cackling. Sarham and his parents in a botanical garden, surrounded by flowers. Sarham floating in a zero-g room full of colorful padded objects while strangers flew behind him in the background. Sarham in a restaurant with a bunch of friends, food heaped in front of them, tables and tables and tables behind them packed with families and couples and groups, so packed some of them were standing by the bar. Sarham on another planet shown with rings behind him - Sarham in a fancy coat at some sort of holiday party - Sarham receiving an award on stage with classmates all around applauding - Sarham in dozens of outfits, dozens of places, with dozens of people, smiling, smiling, smiling.

Had all this happened?

This many things?

"Are they real?" he heard himself ask.

"They're real," said Sarham, in a soft broken voice. "They're all real. There's more. Those are just the highlights the app uses as wallpaper when I open it. Do - do you believe me, that they're real, and not - like the village -"

"The village?" asked Kyeo, feeling empty. Small. Overwhelmed. *Poor*

"They have us in a village that they want us to think is normal, like everyone on Ibyabek lives that way all the time, and they put people in it, and pretend they live there," said Sarham. "The village... exists. You can go knock on the walls. But we can *tell* - it's *different*. It's like - look at this." He tickled the lens and it popped up a photo of a shelf of packages. "That's the tofu section," Sarham went on. "Of the grocery store where my family shops. I went out for a few things and they didn't have my mother's favorite kind. I took this to send her so she'd see what was in stock so she could point me to what her second choice was. I had to take two pictures," he skipped to

the next one, clearly taken just to the left of the first, there was overlap, "because it didn't all fit in one shot easily."

Kyeo skipped to the next picture. It was Sarham in some deliriously crowded building with high swooping ceilings, art glass dangling from the ceiling to make an air-bordered mosaic in the shape of a swan, trees growing indoors. The depicted Sarham had a backpack on, and a suitcase with wheels, and out the window behind him was a space shuttle.

"That's from when we left for here. I posted it where my friends could see as a goodbye," Sarham said.

"Why did you come here?" Kyeo asked in an airless whisper. He looked up at Sarham's face, his real face, not the rueful smile he'd made for the camera in the shuttleport, and - Sarham was crying. Not sobbing, but there were tear tracks down his cheeks.

"To be with my parents." Sarham took a deep breath. "To - learn. About what it's like here. To meet - I didn't know about you specifically, but - you."

"To meet me and show me pictures -"

"I didn't have that in mind at first. I -"

"BOYS," called Suor's voice, from the edge of the trees.

Sarham swore - or so Kyeo surmised, since he did it in Kularan. He jabbed the lens till it went blank again. Stuffed it in his pocket.

"BOYS," came the call again. "COME BACK NOW."

Sarham swore again, dropping his face into his hands.

"They caught you?"

"I think so. That or something's on fire. I'll be in trouble - they might send me home -"

"Kiss me goodbye," said Kyeo.

Sarham looked up.

"He doesn't know how far we walked, how long it'll take us to come, he won't know - if you're going to have to leave it doesn't matter anyway what he said - I *wanted* to - kiss me goodbye."

Sarham didn't have to be told a third time. He took Kyeo's face between his hands and kissed him, hard and fast, and then -

- squared his shoulders, let him go, and obeyed the voice.

Kyeo looked at his hand, wondering what it would be like to hold, but that he didn't ask. They were going out of the trees and back into the glorious civilization of Ibyabek, now. No more skylace, no more kisses, no more time.

Kyeo returned to school, thinner and quieter. He was in a lower merit class with boys he'd never met before, but it was at least the same school, which was very generous of the People after all his mistakes. Sometimes he saw Soh and Imyu and other boys he'd once had classes with across the cafeteria but he didn't try to talk to them. Having ultimately admitted to the philosophical educators that in retrospect he had had the problem since well before meeting the offworlder, Kyeo could acknowledge that it would be a shameful lack of discipline to try to speak to any boy he had ever looked at in that way before. Better to start fresh with his new and better tested commitment to right philosophy, with new classmates he had formed no habits with.

He ate his bread as though it was baked fresh and dripping with honey butter. He drank his soup down to the last drop. He was far

too well trained to ask for anyone else's leftovers. It would be unworthy of a grateful son of Ibyabek.

The first time the water came cold out of the shower, he wept, but he did it silently, and without flinching away, so no one could tell. Or if they could they said nothing.

Kyeo studied, ferociously, to catch up. He could not be promoted into Merit Class 1 again before his old friends graduated, but they were a year ahead of him now and he could work his way back up. He could with enough work lose only that year and not the entire shape of his life. Five years on he'd be like anyone else in Ibyabek's military service, cured and readjusted and trained and ready, and he'd be past all his troubles and all the hard work of overcoming his weakness, and he would be contributing and happy and married and settled into his place in the world.

By the time the term was out he had turned in six of his classmates for various contraband and curfew violations.

They weren't even on complicated missions to suborn offworld visitors. They were committing petty vandalism against the glorious edifice of Ibyabek for chocolate and to deprive themselves of sleep. Kyeo had let things slide, sometimes, before, had considered these little flexibilities no real assault on the power and integrity of his planet, but if *he* had transgressed -

If *he* had gone without bread to better shape himself into an upright man of the kind his people expected - if *he* had stood, awake, in light that never flickered, battered by recitations that never faltered -

- then these stupid children could take their demerits, and if the Academy of Merit was not the flawless jewel it said it was, at least it would present a flawless facet to Kyeo, as everyone he might lay eyes on buttoned up their uniforms more perfectly and kept their conversations free of allusions to what teachers they bribed and

what tests they cheated on and what pornography they were hacking the skylace connection to deliver.

The stupid children could support Kyeo in his desperate quest to never need a second course of treatment. They could be set dressing to his burning need to fall back into a world where Ibyabek was the storied treasure of the Glorious Leader, envy of the galaxy.

He tried not to remember the pictures, which were probably all painted fever dreams anyway. He tried not to remember Sarham's name.

Kyeo graduated and put in six months' work in a planetside shipyard, one of the best possible assignments to receive going into a military career because he'd be able to observe details of how the ships were put together. He fetched and carried for the welders, learned to clip wires into place and calibrate sensors, spray-stenciled the name of the vessel onto panel after panel of plastic and metal. When the assignment was over he went directly to basic training with no stop at home. There was nothing he had to say to his parents and nothing they had to say to him. It wasn't the Stone Age. He didn't need his family, he had the People, and his family had made it perfectly clear they were willing to yield him up thereunto, so that was that.

In his cohort in training he was not the only person who had been through some kind of supplementary education. Kyeo told himself it was beneath him to wonder what the others had done, when they, as he, had clearly been deemed rehabilitated by the experts. But most of the class were new to the sleepless nights, the short rations, and did not acquit themselves well at first. It was good to take on these challenges and become accustomed in a safe environment, their sergeant explained. The enemies of Ibyabek would not wait for them to rest. The enemies of Ibyabek would not take pity on their

empty bellies when disrupting supply lines that brought meals to the supply stations or cutting off their vessels' access to their pickup.

Kyeo and his fellow veterans waited for the rest to catch up until they could all function on three days of water fast with six non-consecutive hours of sleep. The enemies of Ibyabek didn't push their recruits this hard, the sergeant told them. They were soft and weak and decadent. By becoming hard and dangerous and disciplined the Ibyabekans would defeat them. Even if they found themselves in a battle where - despite Ibyabek's overwhelming technological and strategic superiority - they were locally outnumbered and ill-positioned, their training would allow them to carry the day.

Ibyabek was not at war with any of those enemies at the moment. Most of the military held the border of Ibyabekan space in routine beats, making sure they were close at hand in case anything broke out, and otherwise chasing after fleeing criminals and traitors, or beating back smugglers and agitators looking to land on Ibyabekan soil and infect it from the inside. But there was always the possibility that diplomacy would fail, that greed-blinded foreign powers would want what Ibyabek had -

(Kyeo's vision swam, for a moment, as he fought against remembering a picture of a city on a river, lit up -)

- greed-blinded foreign powers would want what Ibyabek had and make a move, and then the sons of Ibyabek would be called upon to give their lives to defend it. Were they ready? They'd better get that way, because their enemies wouldn't give any warning.

Kyeo looked at another recruit the wrong way in a moment of inattention. He turned the water in the shower cold, cold, cold, even though the heater was working fine. He had to be ready. Everything Ibyabek had was his to defend and if he wasn't a soldier he had nothing left.

Kyeo was assigned to the *Five Virtues* and hummed rather than sang when the rest of his unit raised their voices to celebrate their departure from spacedock. His voice had a gravelly quality to it that didn't yield to coughing or water, like it was trying to prove to a long-gone listener that he had repeated what he was meant to repeat enough times.

But he knew the tune to the Anthem of the Bright Way, because of course he did, and he hummed it, almost smiling. Everything had turned out all right, and he was in uniform, aboard a ship, headed for the Middle Sohaibek demilitarized zone's edge to make sure the Outer Sohaibekans didn't send any ships through without going through proper channels and inspections. They might have to perform those inspections themselves at some point, but they didn't have any scheduled. It was expected to be a routine posting. They'd sleep, they'd eat, they'd maintain the ship and watch the sensors and perform their drills.

For six months they did this.

Kyeo, greener than most of the crew, had mostly menial duties, but also - he thought because of the Sebe Luk part of his name, not that anyone said this to him - he was receiving on-tour training in the military communications protocols. He sat with Officer Tahn for part of each day while he decrypted messages from Ibyabek and the station outposts and the other ships. Kyeo watched over Tahn's shoulder as he converted a transmission sent from *People's Law* and ran it through all the steps to render it as plaintext.

When it'd gone from gibberish in the code alphabet to legible Ibyabekan characters, the screen background turned red.

"Shit," said Tahn.

Kyeo didn't ask what the red meant, though he had no idea. It had probably been covered, asking would be a distraction, he couldn't improve matters with the digression. "Sir?" he said instead, flicking

his eyes over the message to try to pick out key words in the message jargon. He recognized some but Tahn replied before he'd deciphered the paragraph.

" *People's Law* has been damaged, badly. Outer Sohaibekan incursion into the buffer zone," Tahn replied, clipped, not really for Kyeo's ears but for the captain across the bridge. "They're requesting backup and we're closest. Sixty degrees seven minutes by -" Tahn rattled off the coordinates, all relative to the ellipse in which Ibyabek circled the sun, Ibyatok.

"Arrest our movement," the captain told the pilot. "Prepare to come about. Tahn, alert *Glorious Leader's Hand* that they're going to have to cover our swath, and tell *People's Law* - nothing, the enemy might have boarded them, could intercept."

"Sir," replied the pilot and Tahn both in acknowledgment. The ship's systems creaked and the bulk of the vessel heaved as it fired up the engines to counter its inertia. Kyeo gripped the armrest of Tahn's chair to keep his feet. Tahn rocked back a little with the motion but was focused intently on alerting *Glorious Leader's Hand*. Kyeo watched Tahn pare down the message to proper terminology. Once that was encrypted and sent on its way, he started composing another one, asking the captain as he typed, "Sir, permission to alert stations and planet."

"Denied," said the captain.

Tahn went a little pale. "Sir?" he dared.

"Officer Tahn, one Ibyabekan ship has run into a suicidally foolish contingent of Outer Sohaibekans who seem to be under the impression they're wandering into the backyard of some outlying Xeren protectorate that will send them strongly worded letters," said the captain. "That, or it's a distraction. If it's the former, the *Five Virtues*, with five times the tonnage of the *People's Law*, will be able to make short work of them. If it's the latter, I am not about to

be a pawn of the enemy's tactics by scrambling up the entire fleet to the distraction's coordinates. I do not fancy ending up in the military handbooks as a cautionary tale about letting a dozen ships approach from the north while calling defenders to intercept one at the south."

"Permission to alert stations and planet about possible main attack for which this is a distraction, sir!" said Tahn. Kyeo joined Tahn in looking imploringly at their commander.

"Denied!" said the captain. "We'll assess the situation from closer up and report in when we know more."

Tahn deleted his draft of an alert message. Fidgeted with his keyboard, began, "Permission -"

"Shut your mouth until we next have incoming communications, Tahn," growled the captain.

Tahn shut his mouth. Kyeo watched the screen as Tahn backed out to his main dashboard display. The confirmation from *Glorious Leader's Hand* bounced into place, agreeing to cover the path *Five Virtues* had been bound for and requesting a status report.

" *Glorious Leader's Hand* acknowledges and asks for an update on our status, sir," Tahn said tightly.

"Tell them we're taking a detour to deal with some hazardous debris," said the captain. He smiled. "Let's go turn some Outer Sohaibek vermin into hazardous debris."

The ship rattled up to high gear and pushed for the site of *People's Law's* last message.

Kyeo suspected he had a concussion.

He slipped out of consciousness.

Kyeo woke. He suspected he had a concussion.

Kyeo woke up again, dimly remembered breakfast a week ago, felt a wave of nausea in response to the thought, came to the conclusion that he had a concussion, and lapsed again into the dark.

There was shouting. Kyeo's head ached as though he'd knotted all his shoulder muscles into macramé with stress positions. A boot struck the floor an inch from his nose, ran out of view.

The air was thin. Kyeo struggled to breathe. His head pounded, and feet pounded, and he moved his arm, not knowing what aim he had in mind with the gesture. He succeeded only in being identified as a survivor. A fist seized the back of his uniform and hauled him from the floor. He fell unconscious again.

Kyeo was in a brig cell. It had a circular static field generator between him and the brig hallway. Looking at the shimmer worsened his headache. He shut his eyes tight. He fell, not unconscious, but asleep.

Kyeo's head hurt. Was he permitted to drop his arms yet? How many more recitations until he could put them down? Oh, no, he was lying down already, the room was sideways around him, he had fallen, he would have to do it over - twenty times through the thesis to empty his mind of deviance and twenty more to fill it with the will of Ibyabek, and then he would be allowed to rest - he just had to get all the words straight, somehow -

He blinked. This was a brig, not a treatment center.

That was worse.

Ibyabekan soldiers were supposed to carry suicide capsules, but they had all been recalled two months into Kyeo's tour of duty for some reason. (The rumor, which Kyeo tried not to put much stock in, was that several had burst prematurely due to a manufacturing

defect, causing necrotic tissue damage where they soaked through uniforms to touch skin. However, some people also thought that the recall was because soldiers were just using them to commit unprompted suicide for reasons of their own.)

Since then, he had not been issued a new one. Even if he had, he'd been blacked out for long enough that a captor paying any attention would have found and taken it. Kyeo was not in fact wearing his uniform any more, he discovered, but some kind of hospital gown. With the uniform was the pocket that did not even contain a suicide capsule in the first place. Kyeo was dwelling on his current inability to kill himself far more than seemed useful, but he was in a brig and couldn't do anything useful, so it didn't seem worth the effort to do something else instead. The Outer Sohaibekans had overpowered his ship, he didn't remember how, and they'd captured him and who knew how many of his crewmates, and presently they'd have buttoned up whatever was occupying them and they'd start torturing him for information and then he'd really wish he'd had a suicide capsule.

He didn't even know much. They were going to expect him to know a lot, because it would cost them nothing to hit him a few more times in case a few more facts fell out, and he'd be an empty and increasingly ragged sack. He would try to tell them only his name and rank and serial number, like he was supposed to. It sounded difficult and no one had even kicked him yet. No one was even there in the hallway. He just found that somehow he could really vividly imagine being tortured and suspected he might be in the habit of becoming very compliant about it - he'd have to watch for that.

Kyeo Sebe Luk, star cadet, 01992350.

Maybe he could make something up to waste their time. No, if that were a good strategy they'd recommend it and instead they recommended name, rank, serial number.

He kept his eyes closed. He didn't want to see it coming. It would hurt less if he braced himself but bracing himself would hurt too.

No one came for a long time. His head hurt, and he lay there curled up in a ball, and he ran through song lyrics in his head. Song lyrics were safe. Song lyrics didn't make his old deficiency flare up, or float anything sensitive that the Outer Sohaibekans mustn't know to the top of his thoughts. He imagined to himself all the verses of anthems and odes and dirges. He ran out of ones he had memorized, and started over.

He was beginning to compose a second bridge to *The Glorious Leader Lives On In Our Hearts* - the required rhyme scheme was tricky, and he kept losing his train of thought - when he heard footsteps.

Kyeo wanted very badly to open his eyes and know the face of whoever had come, know which direction to flinch. He kept them resolutely shut instead. Let them think he was still unconscious with his head injury, waste a little more of their time. Protect the jewel of Ibyabek.

"Your name badge said *Kyeo Sebe Luk* . Is that correct?" said a voice in a thick tuneless Outer Sohaibekan accent. A woman's. If they were trying to use their sickening enlistment practices to seduce intelligence out of him they would be so disappointed.

"Kyeo Sebe Luk," echoed Kyeo. "Star cadet. 01992350."

"Think you'd be a big ticket item in a prisoner exchange?" she asked.

This information was not his name, rank, or serial number. Kyeo said nothing. He thought about it, though, unwillingly. Imagined his father ordering the return of some Outer Sohaibekan pig who'd been chased down, hoping to get him back. How could they be sure the Outer Sohaibekans would honor a deal like that? Probably it was impossible and he would never go back. He had surprisingly few

opinions on that. He didn't want to be here, in this brig with its eye-stabbing static field across the circle door. But he didn't especially want to be on Ibyabek either, or back on the *Five Virtues*, or reassigned to a new ship or station.

It would have been more useful to have this realization with a suicide capsule on hand.

His interrogator evinced no surprise about his reticence. "What was the *People's Law* doing in the demilitarized zone?"

Being viciously lied about by Outer Sohaibekans, apparently. Kyeo didn't say that. He lay there, eyes shut, trying not to tense up while he waited for pain.

"How many crew was the *Five Virtues* carrying?" she asked. They must have blown it half to smithereens, lost the bodies in the wreckage, and not be sure of their count - no, it wasn't necessarily that, there were a handful of escape pods, maybe they wanted to know how many had gotten away - he didn't answer.

"The things they name their ships," said a man's voice, derisively.

"Those aren't even the worst ones," the woman muttered back.

This wasn't even a question, let alone an escalation of the interrogation. How were they expecting to learn anything? They were really bad at their jobs, Kyeo decided. This was probably fortunate for him, at least until being bad at their jobs led them to forget to bring him water for enough consecutive days. Though he had recently observed that he could really use a suicide capsule about now and dehydration would serve the same end. It was just that thinking about it made his head hurt and it was already doing more than enough of that.

"Cadet Sebe Luk," said the woman's voice, after a silence, "we're going to be docking with a station soon and transferring you over."

So they didn't have their expert interrogators on board. Kyeo kept his eyes closed. He didn't speak.

They walked off.

The ship barely hummed in motion, and Kyeo didn't feel it when they touched the station. The bench-thing he was lying on deployed arches over his body, buzzed its own coffin-sized static field into existence, and detached of its own accord from the wall to travel through the circle door, that field temporarily deactivated. While he didn't open his eyes, he thought he was being floated past warm bodies, Outer Sohaibekan soldiers, on guard in case he leapt up through the field somehow and tried to kill them. He didn't feel especially capable of leaping. He would have taken his capsule a dozen times over if he'd had it; instead, he pretended he was already dead.

"Is he all right? Didn't he go through the infirmary?" someone muttered. "He's just lying there."

"His head's probably killing him," someone replied, "even if he's not about to get a brain bleed."

Kyeo registered this as though it were badly workshopped stage dialogue. It might be. Anything they said in front of him was most likely put on. What were they expecting him to do besides lie there, anyway? Cringe? Beg? Entertain them with a musical number?

The second cell that his bench released him into was a lot like the first. Complete with shimmery static that Kyeo turned away from when he eventually couldn't squeeze his eyes shut any longer. But it also had a window. He looked at the stars as the station spun through space.

Sometimes someone came and asked him a question. Where had the *Five Virtues* been going, what was the *People's Law's* mission. He didn't answer them and they didn't hurt him. Maybe they'd

captured hundreds of people in the battle he couldn't remember and some of those were talking and they addressed him just for completeness. It was unworthy of him to believe something like that about his crewmates, or the crew of the *People's Law* either, but it seemed the most conservative explanation. Contact with foreigners could corrupt a person's philosophy, Kyeo knew. Maybe they weren't trying very hard with him because in some other cell some other soldier was spilling secrets in between kisses.

He flinched away from the budding fantasy, re-focused himself on song lyrics, and when that didn't work he ran through the theses he'd recited in treatment, which worked much better: now he felt almost as though instead of in this foreign prison he was in the hospital on Ibyabek, cold, trembling, exhausted, but not at risk of betraying anything but himself.

After he'd slept again, and woken again, the view out the window had changed with the turn of the station. Now it showed a planet, glowing with lava, with a large moon coming up behind its curve. It wasn't Outer Sohaibek - Outer Sohaibek he'd seen through military telescopes during training, it sparkled and the continents hugged a great bowl of a crater ocean on one side and on the other there was a tremendous mountain range, funneling the clouds, bisecting the landscape. He squinted. He couldn't have gone out of the system entirely. The Outer Sohaibekans couldn't have a station around the uninhabitable innermost planet, that was Ibyabekan territory and even if they'd grown bold and sneaky enough to try it building a station took time. The rest of the system was gas giants, Outer Sohaibek's own planet of the same name, and -

That was Old Sohaibek, he realized. It was still hot.

Maybe the other side that he couldn't see now was where the refugees fleeing Outer Sohaibekan oppression came from. Or maybe until they were able to get to Ibyabek they lived on the moon, which looked like it might be able to hold atmosphere. He'd never met

anyone from Old Sohaibek and didn't know a lot about the situation, he'd just seen the announcements now and then about Ibyabek welcoming another shipful of lost brothers and sisters who had determinedly escaped Outer Sohaibek-controlled space and made it into Ibyabek's arms.

The planet turned. More of it came into the light of Ibyatok. It didn't have much ocean any more but he could make out some detail, where the lava flowed from a thousand points across the weapon's impact site, cooling and re-erupting over and over. His head was pounding, still, and he was tired even though he had done nothing but lie there and look and think, but he stayed awake, watching for some sea with an island spaceport, or for the moon to swing closer and show off arcology domes.

The station swiveled away to face the empty sky before he found either. He let himself fall asleep.

Kyeo was awakened by a constricting sensation around his wrists and ankles. Every muscle in his body was in instant competition to be the one that extricated him from the restraints, from his legs to his clenching jaw, but they held fast. "Relax," said a voice behind him, another woman, what was *with* the Outer Sohaibekans, why hadn't they all died out if they kept putting women in space instead of keeping them home to bring up the children. Kyeo didn't relax, couldn't relax, all his stoicism in the expectation of torture was gone now, he couldn't breathe -

"Relax!" she repeated, and "It's just so you don't hurt me or the doctor. You had a concussion and I know it's been a while since you were last seen, she's going to make sure you're okay. I'm going to have to sedate you if you can't calm down."

They called them doctors, did they. Kyeo struggled a few seconds more, made no progress. Craned his head to get a look at the

speaker. She was in Outer Sohaibekan uniform, of course, and the "doctor" in a modified version of it, holding some instrument with a light on the end that she shined into his eye - he flinched, lurched his head away, it was six in the morning again on his third night with no sleep and he was staring at the sunrise, begging it to see him to the end of the ordeal so he wouldn't have to do it over again -

"Hold him still," said the doctor. Hands clamped over his ears and turned his head. Kyeo made a desperate choking noise and the doctor's fingers pried his eyelid open. "I'm trying to see if you're recovering from the injury, I'm not trying to murder you," she said.

"He'd be more likely to believe you if they let us tell the Inner Sohaibekan prisoners anything," muttered her assistant. "They always think we're going to torture them!"

"Sure, we could tell them we're not going to, and they wouldn't believe us, until we didn't torture them, which they'll notice anyway. And we swap them back later and, what, they lead a popular revolution? They defend our reputations to their fellows?" said the doctor. "They see the light and refuse to be exchanged back home and we leave our own to rot? No, we keep our mouths shut, he doesn't learn anything, we save a lot of money on therapists and diplomats, and, get this, he also doesn't get tortured, isn't it funny how we can do that for free. This side looks okay..." She switched eyes.

Kyeo was not entertained by the vermin's psychological games where people tortured him while talking about how they weren't torturing him. He drowned in light too bright too bright too bright, it was high noon and he was holding position in the ice bath and the day was hot and he was freezing under the slicing rays of the sun. She held his eye open and looked into it.

"Congratulations, I expect you to make a full recovery," said the doctor. "Assuming you eat and drink. They got something into you

last time you were seen but that was a while ago and you haven't touched anything and by now it'd stay down."

If Kyeo had been offered food or water he hadn't noticed. "Pigs," he muttered.

"If eating four meals every day makes us pigs," said the assistant, "sure."

"What do you think he's going to *do* with that information?" asked the doctor, checking Kyeo's pulse. "Go home and tell everyone that we get enough to eat, he knows because we *said* so, declare a holiday and beg to be annexed?"

Kyeo shuddered when she touched his wrist. He hated them. Willed their words to turn into so much birdsong, so he would stop trying to imagine meaning into it.

"Sorry, doctor," said the assistant.

The doctor finished inspecting him. She left. The assistant hung back a minute.

"Do you not know how to work the water dispenser?" she asked. "Sometimes Inner Sohaibekans don't."

He *hated* her. Ibyabek was not Outer Sohaibek's province, differentiated by proximity to their star, it was a separate, noble world that had its own name, were there *any* other polities they held in enough contempt to refuse to *name* -

"I'll show you," she said when he didn't reply, and she went to a wall alcove Kyeo had ignored before, waved her hand in it. A squirt of water descended from the ceiling. "Doubles as a shower if you want one. The floor there is static, see, you can stand right on it, and it drains fluids, so it's the toilet too. I'll get you some food and then let you go. All right?"

He was not going to claim to this woman dressed up as a soldier that anything was all right. He glowered at her, feeling ridiculous in his hospital gown with his wrists and ankles pinned to the hard bench. A proper interrogation would have him cinematically tied to a chair, still wearing his uniform, bleeding from the face, while a real enemy soldier shouted at him. This was no more pleasant and a hundred times less dignified.

She let herself out through the static circle that barred the door and came back with a tray. Noodles, meatloaf, green beans, gravy over all of it. They were trying to soften him up with fancy food now? Like he'd sell out his planet for meatloaf and gravy. Like anyone, however hungry, would be overcome by temptation with lingering nausea from a head injury. Like they weren't vacillating between tactics so fast he could barely keep track of them. Whatever.

The soldier-girl didn't make him answer any questions to get the food, just set the tray on the floor and stepped back out through the static field and left. His restraints vanished.

The gravy smelled good.

Kyeo fell on the food, which he was obliged to eat with his hands, but they had already decided not to allow him his pride, so that wasn't unexpected. He drank from the ceiling.

He watched the stars spin, outside the window.

Kyeo was bored, and he was lonely.

They brought him food, four times a day, like they really did hope he'd go home and tell stories about how even prisoners in Outer Sohaibek ate like kings. He wondered idly if they were going to try to bill him for it after he was exchanged. He wondered how long it would be, till he was traded home.

In treatment the doctors had sometimes explained to him that his malady was dividing him into parts, and he needed to give Citizen Kyeo control over his character and his actions rather than letting Deviant Kyeo take over, even if, like a dormant infection, the troubled part of him could try to flare up now and then.

This had worked fine on Ibyabek - in school, in military training, on ship duty - because Citizen Kyeo had had a lot to do. Citizen Kyeo had to study. Had to practice. Had to keep presentable, show up on time, smile at the right jokes and complete all his assignments. Citizen Kyeo had very clear instructions on what sort of character and actions were the right ones.

But the Outer Sohaibekans weren't asking him anything, so he had no questions to evade. They weren't even beating him up. Apart from the business with the light there had been nothing.

They weren't keeping him completely without human contact. The meals were brought and the old trays taken by people, and they greeted him and might have said more if he'd had anything to say about it. But Citizen Kyeo didn't want to engage them in conversation. Neither, for that matter, did Deviant Kyeo.

Deviant Kyeo wanted to stare at the stars and try to find Kular and imagine himself into those paintings that he'd seen, like just by flying a ship in the right direction he could land right in the fantasy. Drop into place in a dream of a Kularan city, full of glittering towers, right next to -

He tried not to remember his name.

He knew his name anyway.

The water that came out of the ceiling was lukewarm, an unhappy medium between drinking and showering temperatures, and not chilly enough to punish Deviant Kyeo for existing. So -

- he existed.

Sarham had probably forgotten about him. It had been years. Brief. Probably the Kularans had their own opinions about boys of theirs who - even if it was permissible to kiss other *boys*, probably *Ibyabekans* were another matter. Maybe Sarham had gone to his own hospital on his own planet and - neither Kyeo wanted to complete the thought, but he had less and less control over his thoughts - been treated. Had had his own Kularan litanies to repeat until only Citizen Sarham was left, patriotic and ready to kiss appropriately domestic boys.

Spinning fantasies, Kyeo did not imagine Sarham into a prison cell in order to undo that probable cure. It would have been a poor fantasy. He just imagined that Sarham had been unable to afford the doctors and they'd left him untreated and he was there, circling that spot in the sky, remembering and wishing.

He didn't want to be traded back and go in for another course of treatment. Maybe he'd be able to hide it very well, which was really the same thing as being cured, practically speaking. Kyeo thought that would be doable. It wasn't like Sarham was around.

There was a maintenance robot in the hallway, sometimes, softly whirring as it opened panels and fiddled with the things inside, and swept the floor, and turned a camera on Kyeo to make sure he was breathing. When he'd been in the prison station for a week, it stalled in place a few paces from the static field. Someone came along to fix it a few minutes later, flipping it onto its back like a turtle and popping it open to unjam it, swearing under his breath. Someone else came at the same time for the second meal. (If Kyeo's food deliveries were patterned after theirs, which he wasn't sure about, they liked big breakfasts and two lighter snackier meals in the middle of the day and heavy ridiculous dinners.)

"Hi, Cadet," said the one with the tray, slipping it through the field and setting it on the floor. Kyeo never replied, though sometimes he reflexively nodded at them. Today he got a persimmon and a bowl of nuts. He pulled the tray over to him with his foot and grabbed the fruit.

"Do any of them say hi back?" wondered the maintenance worker.

"I got one who tells me to fuck myself," said the one with the tray. "But you don't wanna flirt with solitary, that gets your whole chain of command written up. Having an ambassador on board can only make it worse."

"Since when have we got an ambassador on board?"

"Since 0200. I ran into him in the *dining hall* ."

"Ambassador to where?"

"Inner Sohaibek! But not from us, from Kular -"

Kyeo assumed they had cameras on him and that didn't keep him from being glued to this conversation with his persimmon bitten once and chewed zero times, juice oozing onto his tongue.

"What's he doing here then?"

"Visiting. His kid goes to university onplanet. Here's just a supply stop for his shuttle."

Kyeo forced himself to chew his bite of persimmon. Wrenched his eyes away from the conversation.

"Should we be talking in front of, uh, him?"

"- you know what, probably not - I'll see you at supper -"

"See you."

Kyeo did not look at them when they looked at him. He stared resolutely out the window at molten Old Sohaibek.

Sarham wasn't circling the Kularan star at all. Sarham was in the next orbital over.

Kyeo knew he *should* do nothing. Not react at all. Let them think he was eavesdropping for juicy intelligence on the whereabouts of ambassadors, fruitlessly enough, and wait in his cell, until they set up a prisoner exchange. If he had any discipline left that would be what he'd do.

He didn't have very much discipline left. He imagined speaking to one of the Outer Sohaibekans who delivered him food. "I want to see Ambassador Peng," he'd say, or, "Please tell Ambassador Peng that I am here". Or he could skip it altogether and just say "I decline to be exchanged". The doctor had said prisoners could refuse - except what if they didn't care if he wanted to go home and that had been a trap, planted there in the semblance of banter, so that he'd have more to confess to the authorities on Ibyabek on his return - so they'd keep their hands clean and punish him for offending them all the same -

For all he knew it might not be Ambassador Peng at all. There could be a new ambassador. It had been a few years.

That decided him. He'd ask if it *was* Ambassador Peng. If it was, they might mention Kyeo to him and he might - drop by? Tell Sarham? Were civilians even allowed in random prisoner of war station-segments? The connection would be established, at any rate. If it was not, they might not tell him either way, might suddenly remember that they preferred to tell him very little, but precisely because it was the sort of thing a prisoner fishing for intel might ask they wouldn't read into it very deeply.

He finished his snack. When his next snack arrived - two strips of bacon, a little bowl of congee with cream and sugar, the *showoffs* - he cleared his throat. The Outer Sohaibekan looked startled, jerked his hands back through the static.

"Is the ambassador on board Wulaar Peng?" Kyeo asked.

"...I don't know his name," came the confused reply, which had to be the least helpful possible answer, and now what, did Kyeo ask him to go *check* - he wasn't sure he'd keep his snack down if he had to beg favors off his captors for them to grant or refuse.

"Oh," said Kyeo blankly, instead, and he took up his tray, started nibbling on the bacon while it was still warm.

"Why do you ask?" wondered the stationer after a silence.

Answering this did not constitute asking for a favor. Peng could tell them himself if he liked any time, it wasn't a secret - "We've met."

"Huh."

Kyeo stuffed his mouth full. The guard took the hint and moved off.

The bacon was delicious.

When Kyeo woke up at the next windowful of dawn, Ibyatok pouring its rays into the room - he slept with his back to the window, so it wouldn't get him in the eye - he found Ambassador Peng sitting on a folding chair in the hallway.

Kyeo didn't really know what to do with that - with him being there at all, with him regarding Kyeo levelly and sadly, with the traces of his son visible in his face. So he waited. Probably Wulaar had some sort of plan if he'd come.

"Small world," was what Wulaar said.

"What?" said Kyeo, sitting up.

"It's an expression. It means - it's such a coincidence to run into each other." Wulaar's expression was unreadable.

"Yes," Kyeo said.

"I heard you asked after me. Was there something you wanted?"

Silence. "I -" Kyeo looked away. "I only asked if it was you, or someone else. I didn't know."

"I kept the job."

Was Sarham okay, had Sarham been in terrible trouble, he went to university on Outer Sohaibek *now* but Kyeo had in the same amount of time gotten through an entire course of philosophical treatment and joined the military, a lot could happen in a few years, what had happened over those pretty lies full of colors and smiles - "Oh."

Wulaar looked at him a bit more. Seemed to weigh something in his mind. "My shuttle moves on in a couple of hours," he said. "I can't stay long. Are they treating you all right here? Food and medical attention and all?"

"Yes," said Kyeo, though he did note that the ambassador had not asked whether he had wanted to receive any of the medical attention.

"They don't usually have civilian visitors in here," Wulaar said. "I can open some doors, but this is because I have a title to wave around. If you wanted to go anywhere else, see anyone else, you'd need to get processed for a transfer into a planetside facility. It's much harder to get back to *Ibyabek* from there."

Kyeo didn't answer. He wondered what facial expression he was making; it would probably be mortifying if he could look in a mirror. But at least Wulaar called it *Ibyabek*.

"Do you know how you'd ask for the transfer," said Wulaar, "if you wanted to?"

Kyeo shook his head.

"You can tell any of the guards that you don't consent to participate in the next prisoner exchange," Wulaar said. "They'll have some questions for you. You - don't necessarily have to answer *all* of them, but if you won't answer *most* of them, they figure you're just angling to get out and commit sabotage. They'll be very concerned about that. They'll want to festoon you with all sorts of things meant for detecting lies. If they're convinced you don't want to - blow things up or what have you - they can move you to a dirtside lockup. There's integration programs, they don't keep *Ibyabekan* refugees forever."

Ibyabekan refugees. The phrase was a stumbling block for Kyeo's mind - people didn't flee *Ibyabek* as refugees, not and fetch up in *Outer Sohaibek* - he wasn't - he didn't - it wasn't like that -

Wulaar looked at him, expression layered with complications. "And then they'd let you go, eventually - in a few months, maybe a year if you didn't adjust very well. You wouldn't have to stay on Outer

Sohaibek if you didn't like it, that's just the easiest place for most people because the language is mutually intelligible."

It wasn't like that, Kyeo thought. Wherever they were getting people who were claiming to be *Ibyabekan refugees*, he wasn't like them. But he didn't know what it was like, so he didn't say anything.

"Sarham," there was his name, in someone's voice, spoken out loud, Kyeo - wanted to die of it, actually, but maybe just because he didn't have a better idea right now - "goes to the University of Starport." He hadn't made Kyeo ask. So many small mercies. Being a diplomat suited him. "And he can't come here, but I think he'd come to the planetside lockup."

Kyeo did not say *will he touch me or does he miss me or did they hurt him or is he still that word I don't know how to pronounce*. He said: "Thank you, sir."

Wulaar nodded, murmured "you're welcome". He stood, and collected his folding chair, and left.

Outer Sohaibek had heavier gravity than the station or Ibyabek. It was hot and humid, at least the region where he landed, and the sky was the wrong color, and the building they put him in was all right angles and static fences and ostentatiously abundant food.

The places where they'd stuck contacts for their half a dozen lie detectors itched - they'd thought he was lying, when he wasn't, over and over, and finally when they had circled back to trying to confirm his *name*, they'd hauled a doctor in and the doctor had attached still more things to him until she'd determined he was "having a panic attack", apparently Outer Sohaibekan terminology for the cold bright crushing feeling. She'd tucked something under his tongue and the world had gone warmer and dimmer and gentler and then he could get through the questions without anything beeping at him.

Kyeo was installed in a new cell. They called it a "room", not a "cell", and during the day he could come and go between the cell and the cafeteria and the gymnasium and the library, but the static field went up at night. It had a window, but so had his cell on the station.

There were a few other people living there. Ibyabekans. Kyeo didn't want to call them refugees, but they called themselves that. There was an old woman and her grownup daughter and two grandkids, fourteen and twelve, and a sick toddler who had a doctor in to check on it every afternoon. There was an old couple who got visits from another old couple who held their hands and showed them photographs and once brought them their twenty-year-old grandson to meet. There was a man a few years older than Kyeo who didn't get visits but did get a lot of letters. There was a girl a few years younger than Kyeo who got extra therapy appointments.

Everybody got therapy appointments. Kyeo's were three times a week. The therapist, Dr. Dae, wanted to know what the panic attacks were about, and why he'd chosen to come to Sohaibek, and how he felt about "Inner Sohaibek", and what his plans were for the future. Kyeo didn't have a lot to say to him. Dr. Dae had an awful lot of fancy diplomas up on the wall in his office but if all they qualified him to do was ask questions that didn't have any answers they were probably as good as fake.

Sarham didn't come, and didn't come, and didn't come.

Eventually Kyeo decided the therapist would certainly notice if Sarham turned up to visit, and so he might as well notice that he *hadn't*. "I thought someone might - come by," he mentioned the next time Dr. Dae asked if there was anything on his mind.

"Relative?"

"No."

"Did you get on the library computers? Talk to someone on the skylace?"

Kyeo's heart squeezed to a point in his chest. "No."

"Who were you expecting?"

Kyeo was silent. The therapist was silent. When he was asking questions he left long, long emptinesses after them to leave lots of room for all the answers there weren't. This time there was an answer, though, it was just hard to say.

"The ambassador from United Kular brought his family," Kyeo said. "When he was first posted to Ibyabek. I heard - his son goes to school in Starport."

There was a terrific amount of silence after that, even though Dr. Dae had the answer he'd asked for and this was therefore extremely unfair of him.

"Oh dear," said the therapist eventually.

"...what," said Kyeo.

"You're *Stargazer* . - pardon me. Ah, I don't know the young man's name -"

"Sarham Peng." It was the first time he'd said it out loud in so long. It came automatically, while he wondered what in the world Dr. Dae meant calling him a stargazer.

"I see. Sarham pseudonymously published a - memoir of his time on Inner Sohaibek," why did they call it that, "which - mentioned you, under the identifier 'Stargazer'. It had a lot of details scrambled to protect both identities but between that and your file I - suspect - yes. Well. I think it's possible he isn't sure how to break it to you that he wrote a widely read journal about you. I've read it myself,

it's gotten a lot of uptake in people with Inner Sohaibek as an interest... You're welcome to use the skylace to look him up at his school, most students have public accounts, and ask after him. The librarian will help you if you need it."

"He hasn't come because - he doesn't know how to tell me?" Why couldn't he come and just not mention it, then, Kyeo wouldn't have known the difference.

"I'm speculating," Dr. Dae cautioned. "I haven't spoken to him. I didn't even know you were Stargazer until a moment ago. But it could be that he doesn't know how to bring up the topic and would find it awkward to avoid. Or he could be busy at school, or he could not know you're on the planet, or he could be unaware you'd like to see him. I'd encourage you to send him a message - friends and family on-planet are a strong predictor for success in refugees."

Kyeo looked at the carpet. It was green with brown swirls and beige dots. Sarham had written a journal - and changed their names, and published it -

"What'd he change his name to?" he asked the carpet.

"Seeker," replied Dr. Dae. "I believe it was a pre-existing handle - it's common to go by a made-up name on skylace. Kyeo - you knew him for a few days, years ago. It seems he made an outsized impression. What -" He checked himself. "Can you tell me about that?"

Oh, that was easier. The therapist was now prepared to settle for any old thing that Kyeo had in mind. Also, since Sarham had already written some sort of publication about it, Dr. Dae would notice if Kyeo just made something up, and therefore he didn't have to consider whether that would be a good idea at all.

"He showed me some pictures," Kyeo said, ambiguous between *photos* and *paintings* . "On a lens he'd snuck from his mother. He -"

Kyeo stopped. On *United Kular* sometimes boys kissed other boys. At the moment, however, he and Sarham were both on *Outer Sohaibek*. Sarham might or might not have had to edit certain details out of his account.

"He looked at me," he said instead, softly.

The facility librarian, who came in for a couple of hours most days but spent most of her time at an ordinary prison up the road with a larger population, helped him find the messaging address. There was a directory of all the students of the University of Starport just there on the skylace, in case anyone wanted it, whoever they were. It was more than a little baffling that someone had done this - that someone had, since this was not Ibyabek, *paid* someone to do this, had prioritized this directory's existence over food or heat or the option to go to the hospital when sick, and then just let everyone look at it for free. But there was Sarham -

- there he was, crisply done up for his official student photo, a little older than Kyeo remembered him, standing out in a mostly Outer Sohaibekan sea of faces -

- with an address.

The librarian arranged Kyeo an address too, these were apparently *also* free, Kyeo was beginning to be very dubious of Outer Sohaibek's claim to be a capitalist planet. Kyeo did at least know how to type, he'd done it in school enough that he wasn't lost there. He wrote in a name for himself. Not his real one, he didn't feel right using his father's clan and his father's surname here. He wrote *kyeo*, and, when that was predictably unavailable because there had to be a few hundred thousand Kyeos on Outer Sohaibek, added *stargazer*.

And then in the next box he wrote *I am at Crane Mountain*, because that was the name of the facility and the mountain it sat by. And the

librarian was still sitting there, so - that would have to do.

He sent it.

Sarham was there the afternoon of the next day, at the visitor's entrance. Kyeo could spot him from the window of his room, shuffling in from where he'd docked his bicycle. He really did have a bicycle. He had a bicycle *and* Kyeo could see it, it wasn't hidden away as the embarrassing backside of a tapestry meant to depict wealth and abundance.

Kyeo could leave his cell and go meet him. Usually the other people saw their visitors in the dining hall.

By the time Kyeo had located some of the nerve necessary to do this, Sarham had been shown by a facility staffperson to the room.

"Kyeo," said Sarham. His eyes were so wide open. He looked like he might tip forward, was having to rebalance himself against some pull that wanted to send him tumbling into Kyeo's lap.

Kyeo stared at him without blinking, memorizing him, updating his frozen mental image of Sarham at seventeen with this one, because Sarham was here now but might never come back, might turn around and leave at any time, if for example Kyeo just sat there like an idiot and didn't say hello - "Hello."

"I -" began Sarham. And then, "You put 'Stargazer' in your address."

"Yes," Kyeo said, eyes locked as though by tidal forces to Sarham's now. "I haven't - read the thing - but someone told me about it. And that you gave my name as Stargazer. I liked that."

"Oh - good," said Sarham. "- can I sit down -"

"Yes," said Kyeo, and then realized with some alarm that there was not a chair in his room and now Sarham was going to sit right next

to him on the bed and he was going to have to think of something to do with his hands, because willing them to fall off of his wrists was not going to work. He held very still. Sarham gave him a bit of room, which was terrible, but not in a way that successfully caused Kyeo to take any actions about it.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again," Sarham said. "It was a way to kind of - straighten everything out in my head, after I got home. And then I translated it all to Sohaibekan when I needed to translate something for a school project, and then one of my classmates thought I should publish it - there's not a lot of information that escapes Ibyabek. There are people who are really curious about what it's like there, anything anyone can tell them, because there's not many people getting out - how are you here, Kyeo?"

"Your father didn't tell you?" Kyeo asked blankly.

"- my *father*?"

"I was a prisoner of war -"

" *Kyeo!* " exclaimed Sarham, raising his arms like he wanted to give him a hug, but then letting them fall.

Kyeo, dying slightly, ducked his head and went on. "They got me after some clash I don't remember in the demilitarized zone, where I must have hit my head. They had me on a station. He came through, I heard someone mention him - I asked about him and he got into the prison area - I thought he'd tell you."

"He didn't tell me anything!" said Sarham indignantly. "I didn't find out till I got your message, that you were here, already, and knew all about what I'd been posting. Even if you haven't read it."

"I can read it if you want me to," said Kyeo.

"Augh," said Sarham. "Um. I can't stop you but can you - wait on that - it gets kind of -"

Kind of what, Kyeo wondered, but he didn't want to ask and find that the answer was a long yawn of silence. "All right," he said.

"My dad's not even on the planet any more now so I can't ask him what he was thinking," said Sarham. "He comes by some weekends but you missed him, I guess."

"What's a weekend?"

Sarham blinked at him. Shook his head and smiled. "Most people don't work every day, they take a couple of days off every week. Sometimes different ones, so the essential stuff is covered, but most people take the same two days and those are the weekend. Dad's not on a schedule like that but I am. He comes when I don't have class."

That explained why the librarian had been out without looking like she'd been sick. "Is today a weekend?"

"Tomorrow," said Sarham. "I got on the shuttle after my last class let out."

Kyeo had a thousand questions but none of them would hold still. He pinned one down at random. "What do you study?"

"Economics!" said Sarham. "Like Mom. That's my specialization, I mean, I also take a ceramics class and a literature class and History of the Sohaitok System -"

"Ibyatok."

"- oh, of course. They don't call the class that, though, because they're Outer Sohaibekans."

Sarham was six inches away from him and wore an earnest, hopeful smile and wasn't touching him and wasn't kissing him and wasn't whisking him away to a world of shopping malls and glimmering cities, and Kyeo was the most reprehensibly idiotic person in the galaxy, he decided, because even if Sarham had missed him, and hadn't outgrown being that word Kyeo didn't know how to pronounce, Kyeo had been to the *hospital*, and the dormant philosophical infection might have flared up but it wasn't like it had never been treated in the first place, he wasn't the same as he'd been at seventeen, and he shouldn't have sent the message, and he shouldn't have told him to sit on the bed. Even if Sarham embraced him like a long-lost lover now (and it didn't look like he was going to) Kyeo wouldn't know what to do, and even if Sarham swept him away to a flowery garden or a fancy party (and he was not *legally allowed*, how had Kyeo forgotten for even a second he was still a prisoner?) Kyeo wouldn't know how to act there. He should have gotten traded back to Ibyabek where he belonged.

"I'm so glad you're here," said Sarham, which was, Kyeo supposed, a substantial consideration for the opposite position.

"I don't - know what happens next," said Kyeo, halting, not sure if he'd come across usefully, not sure what would happen if he did.

"I don't know either," admitted Sarham. "I assume they have you in some kind of integration program here, screening you for the odds that you're going to - run amok, try to damage Outer Sohaibek from inside? I don't know how they do it, are you in classes where they teach you to make transactions and use the subway?"

"I think some people are. So far they just have me in therapy. The doctor told me about the thing you wrote. People read it?"

"Not *that* many people. There are a lot of things to read, people filter pretty hard. But - people who are curious about what it's like on Ibyabek, those often turn out to have read it."

"We make movies," said Kyeo. "We have books."

"Y-es," said Sarham. "Some people read and watch those too but they're - kind of hard to learn from. They tell us what the government of Ibyabek wants to tell us. Which is sort of interesting, sometimes, but it's not the same as someone telling them what they *saw*, instead of what an Ibyabekan director put on the screen, or an Ibyabekan censor allowed on the page."

Kyeo mulled that over.

"Like the village you stayed in," he offered after a moment.

"Yes," said Sarham, nodding, "just like that, the books and the movies are like the village, except just the moments of the village where it looks most realistic and doesn't have the same little girl drawing in chalk on the sidewalk till she ran out of chalk and then still kneeling there moving her hand around thinking we wouldn't notice. And I wrote about - the dark city letting us see the stars, and the art museum with nobody in it but us and the tour guide, and the restaurants and the party with those poor girls -"

"The Morale Corps?"

"I wasn't actually sure if you'd have a term for them instead of just not talking about them. Yes, those."

There was a silence. "I think one of the people here was in the Morale Corps," Kyeo offered. "I don't know how she got here. I don't know how any of them got here. They weren't prisoners of war."

"Mostly it's smugglers," said Sarham, "sometimes taking passengers - people die that way, or get caught alive, every year, but some get through, with a few people who have relatives or who just can't stand it on Ibyabek another day and risk it. I think - most of the soldiers go back. I'm so glad you're *here* ." And again he didn't quite hug him.

"You're," began Kyeo, but he didn't know how to put it. Sarham didn't have to hug him. *Sarham* wasn't in the Morale Corps. If Sarham was so glad Kyeo was here and also wasn't hugging him presumably he was glad about some other aspect of the situation. Though Kyeo couldn't imagine he was hard up for people to talk to about his classes or that it was all that interesting to explain to Kyeo why Ibyabekan media was not popular off-planet.

"I'm -?"

"All the way over there," said Kyeo.

Sarham flinched a little, like he'd been pricked with a pin. "I think that - while you're still locked up, I mean -"

"- you think that what?" asked Kyeo, bewildered, when Sarham didn't finish the sentence.

"That it would be - irresponsible to - pick up where we left off?"

"...why?"

"Because you can't leave. They'll hold on to you for months, probably, it's happened before that Ibyabek's planted people here and then they blew things up or snuck back to Ibyabek with information or whatever. They're going to screen you, probably lie-detect you till you're covered in electrical adhesive head to toe. So while you can't leave I shouldn't be - doing any things you might need to be able to leave for."

Kyeo was pretty sure Sarham was a fluent speaker of Ibyabekan but this didn't make any sense so maybe he had picked up some weird Outer Sohaibek dialect thing. "What?" he said.

"Oh dear," said Sarham.

" *What?* " asked Kyeo helplessly, suddenly concerned he was about to cry. "Is it - no, you don't even *know* about that -"

"- what don't I know about," said Sarham.

"After you left I went to the hospital about being philosophically troubled - but I still have *arms* -"

"What is it you *don't* have?!" cried Sarham in alarm.

"- they didn't hurt me, Father told them not to leave any marks," Kyeo clarified hastily, "just, I was treated, I'm not how I was - but that doesn't mean you couldn't hug me -"

"He told them not to leave any marks," said Sarham slowly.

"I think that made it take longer, before I was better," Kyeo confessed.

Sarham shook his head slowly, as though to clear it. Was, slightly, hugging *himself*, which Kyeo considered ridiculous of him, since Kyeo was right there and had crossed the gulf of space and even produced actual human language on several occasions in order to see him and, as he'd explained, had arms. "How are you better? What'd they do?"

"Lots of things," said Kyeo. He did not want to have a panic attack - what a useful word the Outer Sohaibekans had invented - right here for no good reason when it wouldn't even get Sarham to touch him. "So - if I'd stayed, I mean - so I could get married like a normal person, have kids, keep my eyes off my classmates."

"So what you mean is," said Sarham, "they did something - that did not leave any marks - uh, did they drug you -"

"No."

"Something that did not involve any marks or any drugs, to try to turn you into a heterosexual person who could get married and have kids Ibyabek-style and not have crushes on boys... and you believe that this *worked* ... but you still want to hug me, and you left Ibyabek and came here and asked for me, and you're apologetic about not being able to - what."

"...I don't know," Kyeo said, confused, "we didn't get that far! You were there!"

Sarham plopped his face into his hands. "But whatever it is you think you might not be able to do it because of whatever they did to you."

"Yes. I'm - sorry -"

"No, no, Kyeo, it's okay. I'm - not worried about that."

"So hug me," said Kyeo.

"I am worried about something else completely different," Sarham clarified.

"Drat."

Sarham burst out laughing. Bit his lip a little, laughed some more. Kyeo leaned a little to get a better view of his face like that, enchanted.

"Sorry," Sarham said, eventually. "Um, there's this concept where if you're going to be - in a relationship with someone that is of the kind that involves kissing, even though you were talking about hugs - you have to be sure the other person's other options are okay? And you don't have a lot of options! You're locked up and they're not going to listen to me if I tell them to let you go ahead of schedule. I could just not come back if you didn't want to see me, but you don't know *anyone else on the planet*, it'd be reasonable to be scared you'd come out and be all alone. It'd be reasonable to worry that if

you found out actually you didn't like me that much or that way after all, and broke up with me, I wouldn't come back -"

Kyeo made a little involuntary noise.

"Yes, see - and being stuck in a relationship like that's no good. So I think I'll just - visit you a lot, till you're out, but. Be all the way over here. It's not that I don't want to," he added, almost plaintive.

Kyeo was not sure what to do with this. It was self-evidently stupid, but apparently Sarham didn't think so, so presumably saying "that is self-evidently stupid" would not be a winning argument.

"I could make friends on the skylace," he suggested eventually. "To know more people on the planet. But I don't know if you'd like my idea for how."

"...is it 'find my site and tell all the people there you're Stargazer'," said Sarham tiredly.

"Yes."

"I can't stop you."

"But you'd want to."

"I didn't think you'd ever - I thought you were stuck there, forever. I didn't write it imagining you reading it," sighed Sarham. "I'd want to show you eventually! Just not - right now."

"I won't do it if you don't want me to," said Kyeo. "But I wish you weren't all the way over there."

"...maybe if it's just hugging," said Sarham uncertainly. "I don't think I've ever read about a scandalous consent violation where they were only hugging."

Kyeo tipped right over and plastered himself to Sarham's side, arms around his middle, cheek pressed to his shoulder. Sarham made a humming noise and draped his arm over Kyeo's shoulder, put his hand in Kyeo's hair.

"If *I* kiss *you* ," Kyeo said, "does that mean you stop letting me hug you, or does it mean you explain to me how that's very unwise on my part and you will not encourage me?"

"Um," said Sarham.

"I will try to come up with other ways to make skylace friends," Kyeo assured him, and he pressed his lips to Sarham's neck. He was rewarded with a breathy laugh, so he tried more spots. If he kissed Sarham's ear Sarham would not think that he had made some kind of mistake and had accidentally kissed back, with his ear, somehow. Presumably. This happy presumption was true of most of Sarham's face, come to think of it.

"I missed you," Sarham said, as Kyeo went from leaning on to him to pretty much sitting on him and Sarham went from slightly petting Kyeo's hair to squeezing him firmly against his chest. "This is very unwise of you, you know."

"Mm-hm," said Kyeo into Sarham's throat.

"All our clothes stay on," Sarham cautioned. "I will take your word for it about not having any marks and you don't wanna see mine -"

Kyeo tried to sit up, but this didn't work very well because Sarham's arms were pretty strong and also he bumped his head on Sarham's chin. "Hm?"

"- not important."

"Somebody hurt you?" Kyeo said.

"I kind of doubt I had it worse than you."

"They didn't *hurt* me."

"Sometimes on this planet we use the word 'hurt' even if it doesn't scar!"

"But *you* have scars," Kyeo said, clinging very hard to Sarham's shirt in a futile defense against the possibility that Sarham was going to get fed up and push him away onto the mattress.

Sarham didn't shove him. He looked at the wall. "My dad warned me, before I came along to Ibyabek with him in the first place," he said, "that if I couldn't stay in line he could probably keep them from actually putting me to death or detaining me for very long but that would be about as far as it'd go. He told me I should stay home if I couldn't cope with that, and I came. Unauthorized skylace use isn't *legal* on Ibyabek. I don't know if they give everybody who does it the same -"

Kyeo's hand went to Sarham's back.

"Yeah," Sarham muttered.

"How many?"

"You didn't tell me what happened to *you* ."

"How many."

"It was years ago now."

"Sarham."

"Thirty."

Kyeo couldn't actually feel the lines through the shirt but he ran his hand up and down where they'd be anyway.

Sarham sighed. "Then they put me on a shuttle back to Kular and I stayed with my aunt and then I got into the University of Starport and I'm *okay*."

"Could you afford a doctor? Sometimes there are infections -"

"Yes. I saw a doctor. I'm okay," Sarham said, resting his forehead on Kyeo's shoulder while Kyeo went on rubbing his back. "It doesn't hurt any more. - that feels nice."

"Good."

There was a comfortable quiet. Kyeo soaked up Sarham's warmth and planted kisses and tried in vain to detect scars through fabric, and Sarham breathed and held him.

Someone came to the door of the cell to apologetically tell them that visiting hours were over for the day. Kyeo flung himself off Sarham like a startled animal - he'd *realized* he didn't know how they felt about boys kissing boys on Outer Sohaibek but hadn't remembered that they weren't really alone -

Sarham looked at him, bewildered. "Okay, I'll - come back tomorrow - I, uh, should have asked, is - physical affection with the residents against the rules -"

"No, no," said the staffer, "though these rooms don't have real doors, just static, so if you need privacy there's a -"

"Got it," said Sarham, blushing, and he caught Kyeo up in his arms again, squeezed him. Kissed his forehead. "I can come back tomorrow."

"Okay," said Kyeo, heart still beating too fast.

Sarham stepped out. The static field went up for the night. Kyeo was used to it but Sarham made a face.

"Tomorrow," Sarham promised, and he followed the woman in the Crane Mountain uniform away.

Kyeo watched out the window as he got on his bicycle and rode away against the sunset.

Crane Mountain was in the broader metropolitan area of Starport, but that meant it was six miles away from Sarham's apartment. He didn't bike the whole trip; there was a bus he could put the bicycle on that covered most of the distance. But it was far enough out of the way that he didn't expect to be able to make it most weekdays, just weekends, especially since he had classwork to contend with and other social obligations. When the weekend was over, Kyeo was unsnuggled in Crane Mountain with his therapist and his fellow Ibyabekans.

He told Dr. Dae that Sarham had come and that this was very good. (Dr. Dae had tried to put it in emotional terms, was he happy about it, was he excited, was he anxious impatient optimistic determined relaxed - it was *good*, Kyeo insisted.)

He tried sitting by each of the other residents and asking them where they were from. Why they'd left. The family, with the grandma and the mother and the three children including the sick baby, had left because of the sick baby. The twelve-year-old had been running chocolate to a fence, from a smuggler who'd snuck onto Ibyabek in a shuttle too well-cloaked to catch easily, and mentioned the baby, and the smuggler had offered to get them out, and they'd left the children's father and the grandfather, not trusting they'd come along instead of reporting.

Kyeo asked why they hadn't taken the baby to an Ibyabekan doctor. They said they'd tried that the last three times and those babies were all dead.

The old couple were related to the other old couple who visited them; the women were sisters, old enough to remember the war. The Ibyabekan man had had a comfortable job in legacy technology maintenance, good enough that he could even pass letters between his wife and his sister-in-law, till he'd gotten on the bad side of someone well-placed in the government. The last letter had told their Outer Sohaibekan relatives where to send a coyote to pick them up. They told Kyeo they hadn't minded much the chance they'd be shot down; they were very old. But this way they could see their loved ones again. They had left all their children behind. They couldn't risk it. Their children didn't remember being Inner Sohaibekans, they said.

The man a little older than Kyeo had been an asteroid miner. His whole operation had blown up due to an engine defect in their ship; he was the only person suited up and clear of it, and the first person to answer his distress call had been an Outer Sohaibekan science vessel which hadn't dared go farther sunward to drop him off with his countrymen. The crew wrote him messages all the time, and wanted him on board once he was acclimated to Outer Sohaibek.

The girl was named Dalun and had, she confirmed in a mousy voice, been Morale Corps. She'd convinced - that was the word she used - a cousin of the Glorious Leader to get her onto Outer Sohaibek. She had told him she was going to do some of that sabotage everyone was so worried about, but really she wanted to go to school and maybe one day marry someone her own age. She'd been pulled out of school when she was fourteen, she said, too fetching to do the last two years usual for girls on Ibyabek. She looked like sometimes she felt cold-bright-crushed like Kyeo did. The third time he sat with Dalun at a meal he asked her about that. She said, "Very like, yes. But not cold, for me. Hot and clammy. Like a day so humid I could drown in it."

Kyeo hadn't known they varied. Dalun shrugged and told him he could ask Dr. Dae, if he wanted. Then she had asked him if he only

liked boys.

"I... haven't really thought about that," said Kyeo.

"Your boyfriend who comes over," she said. "You like him, right?"

"Yes." The word "boyfriend" was sort of funny, but he could figure out what she meant.

"If he was a girl would you like her?"

"...does it matter? I don't think he's going to turn into one."

"I will have panic attacks less often around you if you only like boys," she said matter of factly. "Dr. Dae thinks it will be good for me to expand my comfort zone but that I should do it slowly."

"Oh. I... think I only like boys," said Kyeo slowly.

"You have to be careful with boys, you know," she said.

"Careful how?"

She was silent for a bit, then said, "You have an important clan name. Have you ever been to one of those parties where there's fancy food and gold all over the room and a lot of old men and a lot of girls like me?"

"Once."

"Sometimes," said Dalun, "boys are trying to grow up into men like the ones at those parties."

In spite of the fact that Kyeo had met Sarham at the one party of this kind he'd attended, he didn't think he had anything to fear. But he thanked Dalun anyway.

"I wonder what happened," Kyeo told Sarham, the second weekend, "in the combat I was captured in. I don't remember much."

"You must have gotten hit really hard," Sarham said. He had Kyeo's head in his lap and kept petting him. Kyeo felt ridiculous about this but not nearly enough to move. "You could search the skylace for it."

Kyeo blinked at him.

"...and you'd get results, from various news organizations that get information from the Outer Sohaibekan military and call them out on it if it doesn't sound sensible and have other ways to learn things if they don't talk enough," Sarham clarified. "And have professional norms against lying. So that doing this might cause you to actually know what happened. And not just to read a propaganda piece."

"Oh. - what would I search for -"

"Uh, name of your ship, maybe? It'd be written on the side, they'd know it if there was an altercation -" Sarham pulled out his lens, handed it over. Kyeo found the right symbol to touch, searched *Five Virtues* .

"What *are* the five virtues, nobody ever told me," Sarham said, while Kyeo looked at the results and picked the top one, *Ibyabekan Vessels "Five Virtues" and "People's Law" Engaged In Demilitarized Zone* .

"Unity, selflessness, commitment, equanimity, and restraint. The first Glorious Leader looked at the history of the galaxy and determined those were what his people needed to cultivate to thrive."

"...you might want to get used to calling him something other than Glorious Leader."

"That's his title," said Kyeo, frowning at the article as he scrolled through it. "I know a lot of people don't want to call Ibyabek by

name, but you do, so why wouldn't you call him by his title?"

"Well, I don't call most politicians by their title, because it'd be unclear which planet I was talking about," Sarham said. "If I say 'the president' nobody'll know if I mean the president of Kular or of Outer Sohaibek, considering. Mostly people here just call Ibyabek's leader Lut Naar Am."

"Do other planets call their leaders Glorious Leader?"

"Admittedly, no," said Sarham. "But it's... very weird... to go around talking about Ibyabek's leader as glorious." He was searching Kyeo's face for comprehension and when he didn't find it he gingerly went on, "It's got a value judgment in the title, unlike 'president' or 'prime minister' or anything, and - it's basically unheard of outside Ibyabek for anyone to think that Lut Naar Am or his government are doing a good job, or are - of good character or anything."

Kyeo considered this statement. Perhaps it was not true that Ibyabek was widely admired and that the line of Glorious Leaders was credited with its broadly recognized development and accomplishment. And yet.

"That doesn't mean *I* shouldn't call him that."

Sarham winced.

"I can tell you're evading something."

"You haven't been out very long and - and all you've seen is the inside of this prison dressed up to look like a hotel," said Sarham. "I don't want to overwhelm you, or - start a fight or anything. Uh, I talked to one of my professors whose mother came from Ibyabek - decades ago, when it was more newly established - and he said to go slowly and let you work stuff out on your own..."

"You don't have to tell me," said Kyeo, "if you don't want to, but I think I will call him Glorious Leader."

"Yeah, that's fair," said Sarham. "What'd the article say?"

"It said that to read further I should buy a subscription to something called Peanut Microtransactions. Were you making a joke? It *was* kind of funny -"

"I *have* Peanut, it must have logged me out -" Sarham took the lens back, returned it after a moment. "There. It costs, like, half a deci, to read an article? Don't worry about it. - a deci is one tenth of a credit and a credit isn't much."

Kyeo was about to object that Sarham probably needed his money, to disclaim his need to know what had happened to his crewmates, but Sarham had already loaded the article and it was displaying the paragraph Kyeo hadn't been able to reach. Kyeo figured he might as well read it.

"This isn't true," he said after a few sentences.

"What isn't?"

"It says *People's Law* entered the demilitarized zone first."

"How do you know they didn't?"

"They called us for help when they engaged the..." The article had the Outer Sohaibekan ship's name. "The *Swift Dart*, what kind of name is that, which had violated the zone."

"The *People's Law* could have been lying. Or even just mistaken, if their instruments weren't very good and they were off by a few hundred miles and confused," said Sarham. "The news *could* also be wrong, but... I think lying's pretty common among Ibyabekans. And that Ibyabekan ship sensors are less reliable."

"Why do you think the ship sensors are less reliable?"

Sarham drummed his fingers thoughtfully. This happened to take place on Kyeo's chest, which made him laugh, which made Sarham laugh, and then Sarham shook his head and said, "Most, uh, things, on Ibyabek aren't as advanced and precisely made as ones here or on many other planets. The reasons why are complicated but it's enough of a pattern that I wouldn't want to count on Ibyabekan sensor readings."

"Complicated how?"

"It has to do with a lot of stuff about - how you can get people to do good work, and how that's not just difficult but *counterintuitive* sometimes, not straightforward at all, and Ibyabek does a lot of straightforward things and not enough of the less obvious ones. I can try explaining some of it but the first bunch of what I'd have to cover wouldn't be that obviously related and you'd be taking my word for - or paying Peanut for - a lot of the supporting evidence because you haven't been many places and seen many things."

"Have you?" asked Kyeo. "Been many places - here, and Kular -"

"And Xeren and Dorasa and Kymaber, and also United Kular has several planets and moons, I've been to all of them."

Kyeo had finished skimming the article. The *Five Virtues* had been permanently incapacitated but the surviving crew had mostly squeezed onto the *People's Law* and been allowed to limp away, if one believed the news. Several prisoners - his name wasn't given and neither were the others - had been collected off the *Five Virtues* from where they'd been left, presumed dead, by their crewmates. These, the article told him, had been treated by Swift Dart's doctors, and were being held until an exchange could be set up. He handed the lens back to Sarham. "Show me?" he asked in a soft voice.

"- yeah," said Sarham. "Of course I'll show you."

Sarham went through his picture gallery, swiping through a raft of slightly different shots of himself smiling in front of a picturesque fountain - "I wanted to update my student profile picture" - and a picture of a cat and a picture of a cloud and a picture of a bakery -

"What happened to the thing that picked out the best ones?" Kyeo asked.

"They stopped supporting the feature, it was doing a thing where it'd keep shoving pictures at you even if the people in them were, like, dead, or if there'd been a bad breakup or something, and they said they'd get a new version of it in the next release that would let you dismiss those pictures and de-curate them but they haven't yet, it's annoying." Picture of a table with a plate of pancakes. Picture of Sarham and friends at a pool, dripping wet. "There's a decent one. I can find the albums for all the planet-hopping trips specifically though."

And he showed Kyeo a host of Dorasan plants and Kymaber seaside towns and one Kularan planet, half sun-bright and half aglow with lights, rising in the background of an image taken from its inhabited satellite. Sarham sitting on some kind of Xeren hexaped, which was craning its neck to lick his hair. Sarham and his mother in the sky, maybe a helicopter, taking a picture together of Outer Sohaibek's biggest chain of waterfalls. Sarham and his father in twenty places around Starport, pausing for photographs while they drank tea or prepared to enter theaters or posed with public art. Sarham taking pictures of himself in the mirror, trying on clothes. He was holding the lens in his hand in those, though most of the shots didn't make it clear how they were done. "How do you hold this most of the time?" Kyeo asked.

"There's a little thing you can stick your lens in," Sarham said, "that can fly -"

"You're making that up."

"I'll bring it tomorrow, if you like. And you can set it in the air and it'll hover there and you can let it try to find a good angle and pick a good moment, or you can tell it to hold still and do it on a timer."

"You'll bring it tomorrow?" Kyeo asked.

"Do you just want pictures of us? I don't mind taking some, but -"

"We don't *have* that," Kyeo said. "We don't have - lens helicopters."

"Well... no," agreed Sarham. "Ibyabek doesn't. And you don't have one yet. But you can get one."

"I don't have any money."

"A lens drone costs like... thirty credits. It won't take you that long to have thirty credits."

"But I'll need it for other things. Once I'm out of here I will need to pay for a place to live," said Kyeo, queasy, "and food, and a lens - I have been told I *can't* not get a lens - and all the services I will need to make the lens do anything, and clothes, and heating because I know Outer Sohaibek gets terribly cold much of the year -"

"Kyeo," said Sarham. "Even if you just - forget about me and pretend I'm not going to help you with that, which, to be clear, would be reasonable since you'll be in Crane Mountain for months and shouldn't count on much at that time horizon, but to be also clear about a different thing, I am going to help you with that - even then. You will be able to afford all that. Even if you *don't get a job* for *years* you'll be able to afford all those things and also sometimes spend thirty credits on something you don't absolutely need, though admittedly not *every* thirty credit thing you don't absolutely need. There's refugee funds set up specifically to help you start out, government ones *and* private ones, I bet the Crane Mountain people can apply for you even."

"Why are there refugee funds?" Kyeo wondered.

"Because sometimes - because *frequently* , because *multiple times a week* - people can afford to drop thirty credits on something they don't absolutely need," Sarham said. "And sometimes that's lens drones and sometimes that's nice dinners and sometimes that's fancy socks and, sometimes, it's the warm fuzzy feeling of helping out an Ibyabekan who got out and needs support before they can fend for themselves in Outer Sohaibek. Kyeo, Outer Sohaibek is *rich* . There are poorer people and richer people but the poorest person on the *planet* can get it fixed if their electricity goes out. They might have to lean on other people - almost like the ideal on Ibyabek, sometimes - but there's enough, there's *plenty* ."

Kyeo was silent for a while. He caught Sarham's hand in place where it rested, brought it to his lips to kiss the backs of his fingers.

"That's why you can't see the stars at night," Kyeo said. "That's why the planets sparkle, on the night-side."

"Yeah," Sarham murmured. "That's why. Light pollution. You said at the time 'pollution' - but it's not air pollution. It's just everyone having their lights on."

There was something so poetic about it, Kyeo wanted to say - that Ibyabek couldn't keep the lights on, but it could see the stars -

But Sarham could see the stars too, as the suns they were. He could *go* to them, and he could put his lens in a flying device and make it take his picture against a planet so wealthy it looked like it was turned half to gold, and then he could do it again and again, and while he was traveling between the planets he could also look at constellations, if he wanted.

The name Stargazer was -

Kyeo still liked it, he thought, but it seemed sadder.

"Are you crying?" Sarham asked, voice low and apologetic.

"No," Kyeo lied, and he released Sarham's hand to let him brush the tears away.

Crane Mountain allowed occasional, closely supervised field trips. Everyone got a vote - except the toddler, who was too young, but including the toddler's siblings - on where to go, but they all had to go to the same place or stay behind, lest their minders be spread too thin. There were sports matches, theater showings, museums, concerts, a botanical garden, a re-enactment village trying to mimic the way the Old Sohaibekans had lived before the war.

Kyeo's first thought was *they'll rig the vote, and we'll all think everyone else chose whichever of these is easiest to put together* .

And his second thought was of the face Sarham would make if Kyeo expressed that to him.

He looked up everything on the list on the skylace, and found each one with its own promotional materials and video clips of past similar events and a virtual tour of most of the museums and the garden, and he felt slightly dizzy at the reality of the whole pile of them, and voted for the concert Dalun wanted to see.

The art museum won, though, vote carried by the three oldest residents. Dr. Dae told Kyeo he could inform Sarham when they'd be there, in case he wanted to accompany them.

"I think he has class," Kyeo said.

"Sometimes university students have flexible schedules," said Dr. Dae. "Of course if he says he has class, that means no."

Sarham said he could watch the lecture recording later and attend a different discussion section for the week, though, and when the

busful of Ibyabekan refugees discharged its passengers at the art museum, there he was, sitting under the roof overhang in the light drizzle, coaxing one of the planet's native bird-like things close enough to nibble a piece of his sandwich out of his hand. He leapt up, spooking the bird-thing into the air, and jogged over to hug Kyeo and take his hand.

"We have to all stay together," said one of the Crane Mountain chaperones, a man called Hoon. "We'll be head-counting every room. Talk to me if you need to go slower or want to see something specific but do not wander off. You need a chaperone to come along if you need the bathroom." He'd already said that about five times on the bus but apparently that wasn't enough. "Your local companions -" The old couple's counterparts were here, too, and a skylace acquaintance of Dalun's - "are permitted to split off and rejoin, but do not count as chaperones for you."

Sarham sighed, squeezed Kyeo's hand. "We can come back sometime if this is a really unsatisfying museum trip," he said.

The chaperone bought all the Ibyabekans tickets. Sarham had one already.

The museum's front atrium was - something. Kyeo wasn't sure how to describe it. There was architecture this impressive on Ibyabek, it wasn't so much nicer than the art museum he and Sarham had visited there. It wasn't that it was crowded. The difference remained if Kyeo imagined the Ibyabekan museum full of this many people - many of them not even of the Ibyatok system's dominant ethnicity, he noticed, there were people who looked more like Sarham or even more exotic still. He frowned around at everything. It was - the stacks of maps and the racks of headphones at the visitor's desk. The signage, not just the intimidating list of exhibits but also the exit signs and the bathroom signs. The elevators, right next to the stairs. The rugs for wiping off their feet as they came in, and the coat check where people were giving up their umbrellas, and the stroller

rentals. There was a mural right over by the front window, with children's handprints all over it, messy and colorful, and he couldn't stray from the group to go look at the caption but he could see that there was one -

"What is it?" Sarham asked.

"Just - noticing things," said Kyeo. "They - make it so you don't need a tour guide."

"Yeah," said Sarham. "They don't just put a bunch of art in a building - they think a lot about how crowds flow, and how not everyone will want to climb stairs, and how to make it so everyone can get something out of it all."

Kyeo nodded mutely and flowed with the crowd, holding tight to Sarham's hand, following Dalun as she followed Hoon, into the first section.

Their group swung through a section with some things from Ibyabek, but it was a tiny percentage of the museum as a whole and the things in there had captions like *Diplomatic gift, claimed to be the work of Lut Naar Am's nephew Phol Naar Am, real artist unknown* or *Only surviving print of the painter's work after his failed attempt to extract his wife and children from Inner Sohaibek* .

Everything else they saw was from Outer Sohaibek itself or something that had managed not to be on Old Sohaibek when it melted, or from farther-off worlds. It was in a hundred styles, in media Kyeo'd never heard of sometimes. Much of it aimed at familiar aesthetic targets - there was portraiture, there were landscapes, there were graceful sculptures of people and also of smooth-lined abstractions titled things like "glory" and "the future". But the rest of it was weird. There was a gallery full of random objects turned into vaguely-shaped piles and given names. There was a room dominated by enormous rhinestones hanging from the ceiling. There was a glass-doored freezer with a *cake* in it. There were abstract

paintings, which Kyeo did actually like - it was a simple enough leap from abstract sculpture. But the rest of it he didn't see the point of. If he wanted to look at a cake in a freezer - well, he couldn't have actually done anything about that himself back at Crane Mountain, but he suspected the typical visitor to the museum could put a cake in a freezer themselves.

It only occurred to him after they'd moved into a section full of quilts that he could have asked to stay back and read the placard next to the freezer, but he felt shy at the idea, like at least one of wanting to know why it was there or not already understanding was sure to be shameful.

He'd come back with just Sarham one day. The cake might or might not still be there - the signage indicated some exhibits were temporary and he wasn't sure if that was one of them - but something weird would be there, probably, and he could read it then.

Sarham didn't say "see, there's lots of art over here, even though artists need to buy food". He didn't have to.

They'd all eaten packed lunches in the museum food court - Hoon's fellow chaperone Cheong explained that he didn't want to lose them while they all scattered to the different tiny restaurants and had to wait different amounts of time in line, so everyone got stuffed buns and applesauce and honey cookies - but they hadn't brought dinner. When the museum closed there was an announcement over a public address system with remarkably good sound quality and they, with the museum's other stragglers, made their way to the front exit.

"Oh for the love of -" began the chaperone leading the group, when they got within view of the front window. "Everybody hold up - how do these loons keep *finding* us -"

"Who?" Dalun asked. Her skylace friend had gone home hours ago; she hugged herself.

"Is it the protesters again?" croaked the old man.

"Protesters?" Kyeo asked blankly. The construction made sense - a protester would be a person with an objection to something - but -

"There are some elements on this planet," said Hoon, rolling his eyes, "who feel that we shouldn't be accepting Inner Sohaibekan refugees here on Outer Sohaibek, for various reasons, and they've somehow found out we have a tour group here - eegh, there's a lot of them -"

"Should I go ask the museum staff if we can go out a side door?" Sarham asked.

"We have to get in the *bus*," Hoon said. "It's probably already wondering where we are and if we don't show up in the next five minutes it could drop us for another fare. I might be able to update its destination here, if we can get out the back and have it meet us around the block..." He fiddled with his lens.

"Are they dangerous?" asked the twelve-year-old, tremulous.

"They mostly just like to carry signs and yell," Cheong soothed, "don't worry about it," which wasn't a no, and it not being a no felt very telling to Kyeo, who knew that around here people sometimes didn't like to lie.

He peered around the edge of his group. There were at least forty people in a mass on the steps; they were letting other museum visitors go by, though they did seem to be trying to engage them in brief conversation on the way.

Kyeo wasn't sure how they expected to tell who the Ibyabekans were, since they weren't demanding family trees from every passerby. The Crane Mountain staff didn't wear uniforms; the residents had facility-provided clothes, but those were just plain, not *remarkably* so, and he'd seen other people wearing similar things in

the museum. Would they be going off the size of the group? Did they know the chaperones' faces already? Were they guessing solely off who seemed intimidated by the prospect of an angry crowd carrying messages like *Out Of Outer Sohaibek* or *Trade Them All For My Grandfather* or *Our Planet Our Values* -

Kyeo, admittedly, was intimidated by this prospect.

"I'll ask about going out the back," said Sarham, and he scurried off to catch a docent by the elbow. Kyeo felt very alone, suddenly, though he was still standing close to the rest of his group.

"I really need to sit down," said one of the old women. "If we aren't getting in the bus now."

"I should have rented a wheelchair," agreed the other.

Cheong took all the old people over to a bench at the edge of the room. Kyeo stood with everyone who could still be on their feet, waiting for Sarham, who presently jogged back. "A back entrance exists, but it's just a loading dock, it's high off the ground for trucks to back up into," he said. "She doesn't think we can get on the bus that way without opening the emergency exit."

"They're not going to let us open the bus's emergency exit from the outside," said Hoon disgustedly. "Don't any of the *museum* emergency exits open to the other side of the block? I'd call this an emergency."

"I'll ask," said Sarham, and he went to bother the docent again, but she'd gotten far enough into the recesses of the museum by now that this took him out of sight.

"We could just try going past them," said Dalun. "They'll probably only shout."

"Our party includes a *baby* ," said Hoon. "Probably's not good enough."

"Cheong said I didn't have to worry!" cried the twelve year old. Her older brother started trying to reassure her.

"How high off the ground is a loading dock?" Kyeo asked. "We could maybe have some jump, hand down the elderly and the children..."

"I don't know how high off the ground it is," said Hoon. "Shush, I'm going to get the bus dispatch on voice - yes, hello -"

"We could -" Kyeo began, but Hoon waved a hand sharply at him, and he subsided. Where was Sarham? When he came back Kyeo would ask him to find the museum security guards - he'd heard everywhere on Outer Sohaibek had to have those to deter thieves, since everyone was desperate for money. And then he'd either have someone to ask for an escort out to the waiting bus, or he'd learn that the crime rate on Outer Sohaibek was happily lower than he expected, one or the other.

"They're getting closer," said Dalun, and everyone, even Hoon, looked.

The protesters were advancing up the stairs, and they could obviously see the group through the windows.

"The doors won't open from the outside anymore," said Hoon, uncertainly. "- no, I don't mean the bus doors, sorry - listen -"

Sarham came back. "The docent had to leave," he said. " *She* uses the elevator down to the subway, by the food court..."

"I can't take unintegrated Inner Sohaibekans on the subway!" said Hoon. "- yes I know the bus is not a subway, I'm trying to have a lot of conversations at once -"

"Sarham, is there a security detail here?" Kyeo asked in a low voice.

"Probably not human security," Sarham murmured back. "Robots maybe. Cameras. It'd be able to call the police, I guess. Why?"

"I was going to ask about an escort past the protesters but I don't know if robots can do that."

Sarham shook his head.

The protest was close enough now that Kyeo could hear them all chanting in unison, through the thick glass doors, over the hum of the museum fans, drowning out Hoon's attempt to explain the problem to the bus dispatcher. "No defectors!" they were shouting. "Get them gone! Poison planet, poison people! No defectors, get them gone! Old Sohaibek still burns!" They repeated. There was a jaunty rhyming poetry to the furious mantra.

"Do they think *we* hit Old Sohaibek?" Kyeo asked Sarham in bewilderment.

There was a slightly suspicious pause before Sarham nodded.

The baby went from fussy to wailing. The dispatcher and Hoon gave up on trying to have a voice conversation over the din and returned to text.

"I have a stupid idea for how to get an escort without calling the cops on ourselves for being here after hours," said Sarham, putting his arm over Kyeo's shoulders and holding up his lens in front of his face. "You wanted to make friends with all the readers anyway, right, Stargazer?"

"Yes," said Kyeo.

Sarham pressed their heads close together, and thumbed his lens, and said, "Smile," and snapped a picture. A minute later he had it

posted somewhere on the skylace with a few sentences underneath.

"What did you do?" asked Dalun.

"There's a, uh, cult following," said Sarham, "many of whose lenses just screamed at them that there's a photo of Kyeo on the starlace for the first time, and I stuck the picture to a call for help. There's maybe enough people just in walking distance - the university alone, my friends from school will have seen it too - it probably won't actually get us an escort, really, but maybe someone'll have a clever idea we're not thinking of."

Nothing materialized immediately, though. Hoon's lens decided to update some of its software, leaving him swearing at it that if the bus left while they were still trapped he would switch to its competitor and short all its manufacturer's stock. Dalun tried to distract the kids by tossing the baby short distances between herself and the older siblings.

When Hoon had the dispatcher's attention again, some of the rubbernecking on the sidewalk had turned into a more purposeful gathering - a couple people came to the foot of the stairs, barely visible between protesters, and stopped there, looking around, unsure how to identify each other. Kyeo saw, under a fist-pumping elbow, one of the distant newcomers raise her hand and shout something, though he couldn't hear her over the chant; some others flocked in her direction, and soon a little clump of them, half hidden by angry bodies, was growing. Some of them had umbrellas, some raincoats, a few who were all wearing festive garlands of plastic baubles around their necks had apparently walked directly out from the dry indoors and were getting wet.

The counter-protest took a few minutes to form. By that time Hoon had convinced the dispatcher to make the bus stay and accept new pickup location updates from him, but had not convinced them that the party's exit from the museum to the street was the bus

company's problem. Hoon looked about ready to provoke a security robot to fetch the police when it became clear to everyone that there was a second group outside.

The big knot of sign-waving anger left some margin on both sides. Kyeo had thought it was to entice the Ibyabekans to make a break for it in one direction or the other, but it left space for the counter-protesters to slip in along one edge of the steps. There, they formed a line, and joined hands, all facing the protest. The protesters didn't seem to know how to react.

The line took a step forward, crowding protesters farther toward the center of the stairs, and another.

The chant sputtered, slowed, dwindled to four really insistent voices and finally just one screaming "POISON" over and over. Sarham's cavalry started calling, "Seeker! Stargazer!", and when they didn't move right away, they repeated it like a chant of their own: "Seeker, Stargazer, Seeker, Stargazer -"

They'd gotten right up to the wall of glass doors in front of the museum, and secured a whole door, with their escort shielding a path down the stairs.

"What the," Hoon said, shaking his head, but he called the bus around and waved over Cheong with the old people and went for the free door.

There were only twelve people in the little counter-protest, holding hands, but that was enough to cover the stairs and the broad sidewalk up to the door of the bus.

They had lens drones, some of them, hovering over their heads and surveying the action.

"Kiss me goodbye," Kyeo said, while everyone else, half an eye on the confused protest, hurried onto the bus.

"I will see you in *three days*," said Sarham, a little breathless, but he kissed him and then shoved him onto the bus after Hoon so the door could shut and the lot of them trundle away. Kyeo waved out the window, and left Sarham to contend with his devoted fanbase, more of whom were still straggling into view.

Kyeo still didn't read the memoir - Sarham would get around to showing him sooner or later - but he could read the commentary on the non-memoir posts on the site, such as the one with the photo of him and Sarham. There were several photographic angles on the kiss and a lot of text-based screaming about how Seeker and Stargazer were together at last, accompanied by compliments to both of their appearances, interspersed with skepticism about whether the event had really happened. Occasional advertisements exhorting Kyeo to *download THOUSANDS of augmented reality stencils and stickers for decoration and physical art aid!!!* or *BANISH circadian rhythm maladjustment with ONE pill each solar day!!!* were swept away by the moderation system as he scrolled, but kept coming back. Kyeo had been given lessons in skylace navigation which made it very clear these were to be ignored, and even if he wanted THOUSANDS of augmented reality stencils and stickers he had no money for them.

Some of the people who'd been there had written up their own perspectives, accompanied or not by their own photography. Nearly half of them had been friends of Sarham's, not members of the "cult following", who had been on their way to dinner, and had jogged over from the university a couple of blocks away. The ones with the bauble-garlands had been much of the birthday party attendance of a particularly passionate reader, who'd roped them in while leaving the other guests behind to eat ice cream by themselves. Someone had told their haircut robot they needed the bathroom, stepped out, and gone back afterwards to get the rest of their haircut. Someone had been sitting down to lunch at the restaurant across the square from the museum. People had shown up late from all the way across

town, some of them, hoping Sarham would still be there. He'd made his escape after only a few minutes, though, shy of attention.

Sarham had posted pictures of himself before. With some investigation Kyeo found a category for those and went through it. (Dalun walked behind him in the library and looked over his shoulder and snickered, but he ignored that.) Some of the pictures he'd seen before. Apparently he liked to update his audience whenever he went to a new planet with a handful of photos.

Kyeo did not open the section *Ibyabek Memoir*, even though the entire design of the site seemed to want him to, like the font itself had an opinion and that opinion was that anyone on Sarham's journal page wanted to see his posts about Ibyabek specifically.

Three days. He could wait three days and pester Sarham about it then.

Dr. Dae told Kyeo that he didn't think they were making very much progress. Kyeo, who had no idea how much progress was considered normal or what they were progressing toward or how anything therapy contained could possibly be construed as trending toward any goal whatsoever, didn't say anything. Dr. Dae went on to explain that he thought they could get past this if Kyeo would say things more frequently, but (he went on), it was also possible to get another therapist in if Dr. Dae in particular was a bad fit.

"Do you think you'd have an easier time opening up to someone else with a different style?" pressed Dr. Dae.

"I don't know what styles there are," said Kyeo.

"Do you think you'd be more comfortable with a different therapist," clarified Dr. Dae.

"I'm not uncomfortable," said Kyeo.

"...I see," said Dr. Dae. "Do you think you'd be more *talkative* with someone else?"

That would really depend on the someone else, Kyeo suspected. He shrugged.

"I'm going to book you with a colleague of mine for tomorrow," Dr. Dae sighed, "and see if you get anywhere with her. Assuming it's all right with you that she's a woman, some Inner Sohaibekans have a lot of cultural barrier to get over there."

Kyeo still didn't know where any children on this planet came from but it hadn't *escaped* him that women popped up in the oddest places on Outer Sohaibek and seemed to think they belonged there. However ridiculous it was to put one through medical school, probably the ones who graduated had done so by learning material and passing tests (and paying tuition). He might have been nervous if someone had been suggesting a woman scalpel him open, nevertheless, but all Dr. Dae ever did was talk. "That's fine."

So the following morning after a class about Outer Sohaibek's free speech law, Kyeo met with Dr. Suji. She said hello, introduced herself, sat him down, and said, "Your file says you have panic attacks, is that right?"

"That's what they called it."

"Who?"

"The soldiers on the station."

"Mm-hm. When did this come up?"

"They were interrogating me to see if I could be transferred here. It set off the lie detectors."

"Dae has you on those Quick-Calm tabs that go under the tongue?"

"Yes." He'd wanted to know if Kyeo had experienced any side effects when they'd given him one on the station, and he hadn't, so he'd gotten a pack of them for him and they lived in Kyeo's pocket.

"How often are you going for them?"

"Every couple of days."

"When was the last time?"

"First thing in the morning today."

"Mm- *hm* . Before that?"

"When the thunderstorm the other day started while we were having class in the courtyard."

"Hnh. When else, list as many as you can but don't worry if you forget some -"

So Kyeo did - the crushing acceleration of the little shuttle that had taken him from station to Starport. The lights shone in his eyes to check on him after his concussion. The crew on the *Five Virtues* reciting things, not songs but pledges and philosophical theses, while Kyeo mouthed along without air.

"Songs don't do this?" Dr. Suji said.

"No."

"Hrm. Sing me a song."

Kyeo was surprised, but, he supposed, he didn't know enough about what this was supposed to be like to assume that wasn't it. "I can't. My voice isn't right any more."

"Since -"

"Since my gap year." That was what the other boys at school had called it to be polite. A gap year sounded like a leisurely, elevated sort of thing to do.

"What did you do during your gap year?"

"I was in the hospital."

"For -"

"For philosophical troubles."

"Dr. Dae has written that you have a boyfriend - Kularan, goes to U. Starport -"

Kyeo nodded.

"...that doesn't cause problems at all?"

"No?" said Kyeo, confused. He had panic attacks for stupid reasons but they did not generally strike when he was being snuggled.

"Huh. Are you two having sex?"

Kyeo considered this question. It implied that there existed some thing which was referred to in the Outer Sohaibekan dialect as "sex" that two boys could do, but it wasn't otherwise specific. "I don't know."

"...you d- *huh* . Have you ever been in the conjugal visit room."

"No."

"Okay." She took a deep breath. "What was the philosophical trouble?"

"The one that makes me want to kiss Sarham. I have had a relapse," said Kyeo.

"...I see," said Dr. Suji. "Kyeo, can you tell me in what way you were treated at the hospital?"

Could he? Kyeo spent a while being unsure of that.

She looked like she was about to rephrase her question, but held back while he tore off a Quick-Calm tab. Stuck it under his tongue. "My father told them not to leave any marks," he said after it had dissolved. "They didn't hurt me."

"What did they do?" asked Dr. Suji.

"They -" His throat was closing up, somehow, he sounded hoarse. "Tried to -"

"Can you write it down?" she suggested.

He took the pad of paper she was offering. Tapped the pen on it once, twice, elected to abandon sentence structure. *Water, cold. Electric shock. Holding positions. Recitations. Emptying my mind to fill it with the will of the People. Didn't sleep didn't eat. Watched me for slips.*

She took the paper and scanned it. "Slips?"

"Signs of deviant sexuality," Kyeo croaked.

"May I guess?" she asked.

He nodded.

Dr. Suji said, "There weren't any girls there, right?"

Kyeo nodded again.

"So my guess is they assumed any time you became aroused at all, you were exhibiting signs, and punished you."

"Yes."

"I am," she said, tapping the pen on the paper just like he had, "not at all sure how you avoided having a trauma reaction to your boyfriend, considering, but I suppose he wasn't in fact there -"

"No." He'd been given thirty lashes and kicked off the planet, taking - Kyeo didn't know how long - to heal.

"And they weren't having you kiss people so they could punish *that* -"

"No."

"Well. Do you miss singing, Kyeo?"

That was... a topic change. "Very much."

"This has been a little intense for an introductory session," she said. "So I don't want to keep digging into this right now. But we do have fifteen minutes left, so I'm going to screen you for a spasmodic dysphonia type condition, odd though your presentation might be - maybe no one's noticed because you're so terse, come to think of it. We have treatments for that."

"For a bad singing voice?"

"Yes, if I'm right about why," said Dr. Suji. "Not perfect, not instant, not without some re-training work on your part, but yes."

Kyeo swallowed. He nodded again.

Sarham came on the weekend, and Kyeo had a bandage on his neck.

"Yikes! What happened to you?" Sarham exclaimed, touching the sticky edge where it was starting to peel up.

"They're try," Kyeo started, and he coughed. "They're trying something to fix how I can't sing any more."

"You can't -" Sarham's eyes were wide. "Why can't you sing any more?"

"My new therapist says she thinks it's spasmodic dysphonia."

"Spasmodic dysphonia. Okay. I'll... look that up later. You have a new therapist?"

"Dr. Dae didn't think we were making enough progress."

"Oh?"

"Dalun has also tried both and says she prefers Dr. Dae, but Dr. Suji makes more sense to me," Kyeo said. "Apparently it is the sort of thing which has styles."

"Yeah, I went to a couple different people for a few months when I first went back to Kular, after I left Ibyabek," Sarham said. "They're all over the place."

"You went?"

"I felt - mostly okay as it turned out, after everything," said Sarham. "But it's the kind of thing that seemed smart to check? I mean, I'd gotten deported from a planet I'd been excited to visit after just a few days for committing crimes and on my way out they'd - you know -" Kyeo stroked Sarham's back. "So I thought I'd set something up, talk to some people, make sure I wasn't going to turn up with some kind of stupid problem in my thirties clearly traceable back to letting an issue from all that fester. Uh, I guess I might not have been fine if I'd known about your - hospital stay - but at the time I mostly just thought, well, if I hadn't swiped the lens, I might have been around you longer and my back wouldn't hurt, but I

never would have gotten to see your face when you saw all those snapshots of the universe..."

"Why wouldn't you have been fine if you knew?"

"I would've felt like it was my fault? I kind of do now."

"The issue wasn't that I kissed you. My father pretty much ordered me to," Kyeo said. "The issue was that I wanted it. I might have eventually noticed I wanted to anyway."

"- what, and turned yourself in?"

"Yes," said Kyeo, slowly. "Just like I actually did."

"You deliberately -" Sarham stopped, shook his head. "I guess - okay, I don't really get it, but - something along the lines of, uh, it's not that weird if a medical procedure hurts, and they were calling it a medical procedure -"

Kyeo nodded.

Sarham sighed. "I hope it's okay with you that nobody is going to try to treat you for being a jujube on Outer Sohaibek."

"A *jujube* . The fruit? The kind people smuggle into Ibyabek packed in white wine?"

"I know, it's a stupid word - Kularan we just say 'gay', which is a little less ridiculous, it used to mean 'happy' in one of the creole source languages," said Sarham.

"Oh, is that how you pronounce it."

"Have you been wondering - based on my text conversation with my friend about his attempt to set me up on a blind date - this whole time -"

"You remember the conversation too," Kyeo pointed out.

"I re-read my memoirs occasionally. I did it yesterday afternoon, to - think through whether I was ready."

Kyeo looked at him expectantly.

"I'm going to feel weird about it the entire time," said Sarham.

"You don't have to watch me read it, you could just say I can."

"That would be weird too, just not in the same way. I guess I might find I'd rather not be there after the first paragraph and ask you to wait till I'm gone, but - you can start now. If you want. Do you have a lens, or just the library?"

"I have a lens now." He'd passed his skylace use test and they'd had him pick a design, which had to be different from everyone else's so they wouldn't be mixed up if one was left lying around. They had a lot of choices, but eventually he'd settled on a starscape. It had seemed appropriate. When the lens was turned off it looked like a slice of galaxy, black and spangled.

Sarham squeezed Kyeo's knee, when he saw, and watched restlessly while Kyeo found the site and finally let it funnel him to the main attraction.

There was an introduction, first, about how it hadn't been written in chronological order but was being posted that way after some editing, and how all the names had been replaced with pseudonyms for everyone's privacy, and how this was only one person's brief and privileged window into Ibyabek, and a terminology note about how he referred to it as Ibyabek since that was what the locals called it.

"Everyone else here calls it Inner Sohaibek," said Kyeo, pausing on that paragraph. "It's very rude."

"I think so too, honestly, most of the differences in opinion aren't going anywhere but if anyone else changed their planet's name people would get with the program - but most of the time it isn't worth fighting with people over what *they* call it, and sometimes if I say 'Ibyabek' in some random context I have to clarify."

"I don't fight with people about it."

Sarham nuzzled his shoulder a little. Kyeo went on to the next page.

The memoir opened with the trip, on Ambassador Peng's government-issued diplomatic vessel, which apparently also carried a bunch of staff who hadn't been invited to the party or visible to Kyeo at other moments either. A mid-chapter subsection looked back on Sarham's decision to accompany his parents in the first place.

If I'd stayed home, my parents would have visited, but the trip takes eight days. The ship was comfortable, but not *that* comfortable; the work has gaps, but not *that* many. And he might work there for decades. I didn't plan to live out my whole life on Ibyabek, but I was only seventeen Earth-standard, not ready to pare down my relationship with my parents to "most New Years' festivals and probably my wedding".

"Your wedding?" said Kyeo.

"- I wasn't *engaged*, I wasn't even seeing anybody at the time or that would have factored in -"

"Why would a jujube who hasn't even been treated for it get married?"

"...to, uh, another jujube?" said Sarham. "Not to a girl -"

Kyeo interrupted him with a kiss because this seemed like a revelation that demanded kissing. Sarham kissed him back in

surprise, then started laughing too hard and just wrapped his arms around Kyeo. "I love you," Sarham giggled.

Kyeo leaned, very still, against Sarham, contemplating this additional interesting discovery. It felt too large to hold. A lot of things he learned these days felt too large to hold, like he was floating on a raft and constantly bombarded with falling trees, which he had to use to build more raft to keep afloat as trees continued to plummet toward him.

Sarham was still laughing. Kyeo decided he had a little time to incorporate that particular tree into his boat. He snuggled up and said nothing and looked at the lens again.

The station we docked at was old. I think it dates back to before the war. I'm not sure if Ibyabek can't build stations any more and this is all they have, or just sent us to this one for some reason. It didn't depressurize while we were on it, and it was very clean, but it was the most unpleasant station I've ever been on. We had to follow someone all the way to our surface shuttle, and that was the first Ibyabekan I ever met in person. Dad had coached me to be far more polite than I would normally think I had to be, because I wouldn't know the local cues for joking and casualness, and not to challenge the Ibyabek worldview. If that was going to happen at all, he said, it'd have to be slow and careful and professional, not YA-protagonist style. I told him I understood that I wasn't going to singlehandedly lead an Ibyabekan revolution and was just there to be with my family and to observe.

"He was very confident you would want to challenge the Ibyabek worldview," said Kyeo.

"Well," said Sarham, "uh, yes."

"Because -" Sarham would just say something very kind, if Kyeo tried to get him to elaborate, and he thought he could puzzle it out

himself. "You see our movies and our books, you know what our philosophy *is*, but you can tell that Ibyabek doesn't sparkle - and -" What else would be obvious from Sarham's angle at the time. "And that everyone who leaves the planet needs a therapist."

"Yeah," Sarham murmured, twirling some of Kyeo's hair around his fingers. "I can see how it would - seem to hold together, when everyone's telling you the same thing. But on freer planets we hear a hundred different things, instead, and the Ibyabekan story of itself doesn't rate."

"That sounds hard. Hearing a hundred different things - not knowing which ones are -" Kyeo didn't know what word he wanted. Safe, true, reasonable, respectable, sane, useful -

"Sometimes. I think that's part of what your integration classes are supposed to cover," Sarham said. "Picking an opinion out of a hundred choices. Or making one up if they're all wrong for you. I don't know how they go about teaching it, it seems like it'd be hard."

"I think they're sort of trying to get at it sidelong," said Kyeo. "I asked Hoon why the protesters didn't want Ibyabekans here and he gave me five skylace sites to look at for different summaries, and I said why five, and he said because they have different perspectives."

"Yeah, the skylace is like that. Did you read them?"

"I... read one of them," said Kyeo. "Possibly I should read the other four."

"Huh. What'd the one you read say?"

"The author seems to think that Ibyabekans hate women," Kyeo said. "She was very upset about it. She was also angry about the saboteurs, that part seemed more reasonable."

"I guess you don't feel like you hate women."

"Why would I hate women?"

"That's a good question. I think - being dismissive of a group or wanting to limit their role in society gets condensed into 'hatred' even though that doesn't have entirely correct implications, and the author wouldn't be very impressed and change her mind about Ibyabekans if you told her that you're friends with Dalun, or respect your female therapist."

"She's a good therapist. I don't know why Outer Sohaibek hasn't eradicated itself with all this female careerism by now but the article did not seem to be complaining that I should be more eager to see Outer Sohaibek's population age and die."

"Uh... huh," said Sarham.

"Only women can bear and bring up children!" said Kyeo. "I think Ibyabekan scientists are trying to make machinery that can do it instead and I don't know what Glorious Leader will see as the right next move for women after that's perfected but in the meantime if only some people can do an essential job they had better do it. - did someone on another planet already invent the -"

"No," laughed Sarham. "Women still have children the same way everywhere. They just - also have jobs, too, sometimes at the same time, sometimes in between breaks to look after their kids - and the kids' dads do, uh, any childrearing."

"That doesn't sound very efficient."

"I... guess," said Sarham. "The Ibyabek birth rate might actually be higher..." He took out his own lens, did a search, found a graph. "Yeah, apparently Ibyabek has *twice* Outer Sohaibek's birth rate, wow, but the mortality nearly makes up for it, babies like the three middle siblings of that family in here and then more deaths at other ages too. And... there's other concerns in play."

"Other concerns?"

"The women want to have jobs? And the men want to enjoy their kids?"

Kyeo remembered the last time he'd seen his father. It had been when he'd been admitted to the hospital. Suor had told them not to leave any marks - he'd known enough to specify -

He must have trusted the hospital staff, because he'd never checked.

"Mm," he said.

"Missing your family?" wondered Sarham.

"I never saw them anymore," Kyeo murmured. "This doesn't change much. I suppose now they think I'm dead. Maybe Aipen doesn't, if they didn't bother to tell her."

"Aipen is -"

"Older sister. She was already married and moved out by the time I met you. I haven't seen her since I was," he did the calculation into Earth-standard, "thirteen."

Sarham squeezed him.

After a silence, Kyeo read on.

Sarham did not make it clear, in his excerpts, that he was the ambassador's son. Kyeo asked about that and learned that apparently anyone who wanted the name of the Kularan ambassador to Ibyabek had only to look it up, so Sarham was protecting his own identity that way, making himself plausibly the offspring of a random attaché or even a trader or journalist unrelated to the diplomatic arm. Still, he covered his father's rules for coping on Ibyabek - they

seemed to Kyeo to lack a lot of nuance, but perhaps just because they were so compact and meant for a foreigner's use. He mentioned the party. And -

They assigned me a "pairmate". Apparently this is a practice in Ibyabekan schools and some other institutions, sort of like a buddy system but with much more of an implication that if one of the pairmates breaks rules or falls behind, the other is responsible for reporting them or getting them to shape up. I wasn't sure how they were expecting that to work here, but Mom told me that my pairmate was probably effectively a spy. He was the kid of somebody in the government, not an exact counterpart to Dad but someone who at any rate had a son my age. They'd be having him listen to me to see if I said anything stupid or revealing. I didn't actually know anything, but they pulled him from his school break anyway. If the part about the school break wasn't a lie.

"It really was a school break," Kyeo said.

"I figured it probably was," said Sarham. "There's a lot of stuff like that, where there wasn't an obvious reason to lie and it was completely plausible and I couldn't see any reason to think it was false, except for everybody lying constantly all the time about everything, but that's really a sticking point when I was trying to... learn."

Kyeo already knew most of the events of Sarham's visit, of course, but he liked reading how Sarham described it. How Sarham described *him*, even, it was the looked-at feeling all spread out on a page:

Let's call him "Stargazer". He didn't act like a spy, except I guess I wouldn't know how spies act. He acted like one of those kids who's been assigned to be the new student's provisional best friend in school and really liked that assignment. He was

terribly earnest about it, and listening to him I got a sort of doublethink going, where on the one hand I knew Ibyabek has a repressive totalitarian state and also awful metrics on nearly every measure of human flourishing to show for it, but also it had this cheerful kid my age, who looked okay and sounded okay and wanted to be friends.

We met at a party full of smoke and half-dressed girls barely older than we were who hung all over the exclusively male politicians, serving them snacks and flirting like their lives depended on it. Mom told me later that it's worse than it looked, they start younger and routinely go home with the Party members afterwards and can't quit until one of their "clients" marries them and pulls them out of the pool or they age out single and wind up in some kind of state sweatshop.

"What's a sweatshop?" asked Kyeo.

"A factory where the workers' conditions are bad," said Sarham. "Mom thought the girls tended to wind up in textile mills."

"Well, they have to do *something*, don't they?" Kyeo asked, hesitantly. "If no one wants to marry them. And someone has to make textiles."

"I... guess it's true that on most planets if someone is dismissed from one... job... they tend to get another job," acknowledged Sarham. "And that most planets do in fact have textile production. The Morale Corps has girls without other options, though - I guess I don't know how much education and spousal choice they usually get if they're *not* in the Morale Corps. How did your sister meet her husband? If you'd - decided to get married - what would you have done?"

"Her husband's father knew ours, I think. I'd been going to - ask after one of my classmates' little sisters, originally, before..."

"What would have happened to your classmate's little sister if nobody had 'asked after' her -"

"I remember Aipen spent school breaks working at a cannery one year. I guess if she hadn't gotten married she might have kept doing that. So probably something like that, just like a Morale Corps girl nobody marries."

"I'm not going to tell you that everyone on other planets who wants to get married manages to do it," said Sarham. "Or that everyone who produces textiles or cans food loves their job. But I do think - it's better, that they get paid for the work, and can quit if they get a different job offer, and go wherever they like and meet people on their own when they're trying to pick someone to marry. Also that it's illegal to pull girls out of school and make them do sex work instead pretty much everywhere. It being illegal doesn't mean it never *happens*, all kinds of things happen, but..."

"Dalun wants to get married," said Kyeo.

"Yeah?"

"To a boy her own age, she said. When she can be calmer around men at all."

"When she gets out of Crane Mountain she can meet all the boys her own age she wants."

Kyeo nodded, and kept reading.

Ibyabek has one thing to say for itself: unparalleled urban views of the night sky. Stargazer took me to a pier and showed me the constellations. They're not far off from the ones you can see from Outer Sohaibek, so here's a picture of the sky from Outer Sohaibek, with the Ibyabekan constellations Stargazer showed me drawn on:

"You got the Scallion wrong," Kyeo said.

"Whoops - tell me how and I'll fix it -"

Sarham repaired the Scallion representation, published an update informing his readership of the correction, settled back against Kyeo.

The memoirs described the village the Pengs were allowed to stay in by reference to some other sort of village called a "potemkin" that Kyeo had to look up and read an entire article about. Sarham had noticed the fresh paint, the imported plumbing fixtures, the strange activities of the occupants of the surrounding houses down to the little girl with the chalk.

I had seen Ibyabekan movies before, and they do have actors who know what they're doing, at least on screen, but setting up a convincing miniature town was beyond them. The place was nice enough, but it wasn't convenient to anything, it was basically just one cul-de-sac in the middle of nowhere. The "store" that they encouraged us to take stuff from for free got visited by four specific people from three of the houses in the neighborhood, on a schedule, and they took some fruit and eggs and bread and fish, but were very careful not to upset the symmetry of the displays. I didn't know what the people in the other houses were eating at all. Nothing had packing or expiration dates on it and my mother insisted on only taking stuff she could determine by visual inspection was safe, so we didn't have any meat and she float-tested the eggs and threw half of those out. Just cheese that was in its original round so no mold could have been cut off, fruits, vegetables, dried rice and beans and noodles and nuts - and she overcooked everything in case pests had been at it and it had just been repackaged. By the time I left the planet she still hadn't decided whether she was going to trust the cooking oil.

I was surprised the eggs weren't good - we'd obviously have smelled a really bad egg if we'd opened one. Dad said they just don't have the logistics in place to know when an egg was laid, at the relevant level of government, and they were probably trying, but the eggs all looked the same, and if they couldn't find enough fresh ones on time, they'd gamble.

They didn't carry spices or sauces apart from salt and vinegar. Whoever stocked it thought we'd be impressed with calories.

"The food here *is* very tasty," Kyeo mentioned.

"You've... been in *prison*," Sarham said. "Prison food isn't known for being good. I mean, I'm glad you like it, but..."

"I thought they were showing off, at first," Kyeo confided. "Four meals a day and meat at half of them and none of it's ever turned."

"But your dad's important - Ibyabek doesn't have *great* food but I thought you at least would have plenty of it and it'd be okay -" said Sarham. "Like, those restaurants we went to weren't galactic-class but they were fine..."

"Everyone on Ibyabek gets food from the same places, apart from the parties and special occasions like the restaurants, though," said Kyeo. "I guess Glorious Leader probably eats very well every day, and his family, but my mother went to the normal market in Bright City and got bread and dried fruit like everyone else."

"Do you know for a fact, or -"

What would constitute knowing for a *fact* - "I've done work rotations with people who were farmers," he offered, "and spending the winter making bricks and so on. And the work crews all got served bread and vegetables not much different from what we got at school."

Sarham squeezed him. "When you get out I'll take you to a really nice restaurant. I should ask if I'm allowed to bring you snacks..."

Kyeo leaned against Sarham's shoulder. "I might not finish all this today."

"That's fine. I'll be back tomorrow."

Imagine a young Deoun Hei Tuan and you're most of the way there. They could use him for propaganda posters. For all I know they do. But I didn't meet Stargazer as a poster, I met him as a person, and there's something fascinating about seeing the entire force of a human personality compressed into this shape, nearly escaping at the edges. It's awful, I don't mean to minimize that here. It's like those fourteen year olds from Olach who win gold at the Olympics because they've been genetically engineered so aggressively they'll live to be thirty and their coaches abused them but they can sure do beautifully on the zero gravity quintathalon. If I got to interview one of those medalists, I think it'd feel the same way. I'd be thinking: you've been squeezed, so hard, and so here you are. Everything and everyone around you has pushed you this one way; you have a rocket strapped to you and you're fixed to the railroad tracks and there's a strong tailwind, yes, so I can see you're going in that direction.

But what if you weren't?

You're not a crash test dummy, you're a person - this is happening to a *person* - so what if it wasn't? What would you want to do? Where would you want to go?

I don't claim I knew based on somehow-reliable documentation that Stargazer was not being coerced into some kind of men's auxiliary of the system they put those girls through. I suspect he was. I expect to get a lot of respondents yelling at me that

he was in no state to produce good consent, and that it's just as well that I got kicked off the planet before it could escalate. These forthcoming commenters have a point. In my defense I will just tell you that the events I will next relate convinced me absolutely that I got a glimpse of the person behind the propaganda poster and that he liked me back.

"I did like you back," Kyeo confirmed when he read this part.

"I suspected," Sarham said, ruffling his hair. It was growing out a bit. Kyeo hadn't decided if he was going to try to figure out how to get a haircut. The whiny electric device they'd given him to shave with would probably work on his scalp if he were ever eager to be bald outright, but perhaps a solution would present itself before his options were that or his bangs falling into his eyes.

"They did not use me for posters."

"One of their many tragic inefficiencies," Sarham nodded.

Kyeo laughed. "I don't think I felt very squeezed. Or attached to a rocket."

"You said 'when I join the military'. Most kids that age don't even know what they're going to study in college. I think I remember you saying you'd keep following me around even when school was back in session if I was still on-planet then. There's - so much stuff that was chosen for you that didn't come up in conversation, because it was so obviously out of your hands," Sarham said. "You didn't pick your *clothes* ."

"My father *did* suspect you were philosophically troubled in the jujube manner," said Kyeo, provoking a sporfle, "and did tell me that you might let slip useful facts if encouraged in this but he didn't know there was anything the matter with *me* at the time, I just noticed when I thought about it. Also, I completely failed to get you to produce any useful facts."

"I didn't actually know anything much or I don't think I'd have been allowed to go."

"That makes sense. Kiss me."

"You are still not in a state to produce good consent."

"The angry people on the skylace can't see you."

Sarham kissed him.

I was fully aware that unauthorized use of the skylace was illegal. Even if I failed to connect, and my attempt at doing so went undetected, just taking the lens from my mother would have been enough to get my parents sending me packing if she noticed it missing. I was clear on my vulnerability to the justice system, if you want to call it that, on Ibyabek. It was really dumb.

It just didn't seem fair that Stargazer didn't get to see it.

You can get Ibyabekan school texts if you want. They send them out as free skylace downloads; you can get them off the official site or the better-designed mirror by the People for Sohaibekan Reunity. They're doing it for propaganda, like they think their ideals will catch on - which isn't impossible; Ibyabek used to be a fairly normal colony world until the war started in part over the ideals that later developed into the modern form. But you can read them just to get an idea of what kids like Stargazer get taught in school. They have acceptable math, usable engineering that hints at frustrating constraints in supplies and logistics, and completely tragic galactic studies. Some of their tidbits about other planets are based on real events and just blown up into disproportionate caricature (yes, Xeren has a debtor's prison, if you want to call it that) and some are completely fictitious (the president of Outer Sohaibek does

not personally own all the spaceships manufactured in Outer Sohaibekan space, especially not with term limits being what they are, and if she did, she'd have something better to do with the profits than build a palace out of solid gold) and some are... disputed (an Ibyabekan would tell you it was definitely the Outer Sohaibek side of the war that melted Old Sohaibek).

So I had a general idea what his view on the outside world looked like. Those were his textbooks; that, plus any rumor that filtered in from the thin and few channels of free information, were what he had to go on. And it wasn't fair.

I didn't have a curriculum planned. I think that was part of the point, that I could show up with a lens and that if we could get it hooked up I wouldn't need a curriculum because I could find anything. If Stargazer had heard a story about narwhals once and wanted to know if they were real, I'd be ready; if he wanted to read about the Holahsiak genocide, well, that wouldn't be the most flattering thing he could pick, but I'd be able to find stuff about that too, and in its own way being able to criticize Kularan history would be just as demonstrative as showing off its good points.

He was able to use his student credentials, which I guess he usually only enters on devices with software watchdogs but which still worked on Mom's lens. But as for what to do with it, "anything" turned out to be too much. He didn't know what he wanted, he didn't know what there was to want, and everything in my head at that moment seemed suddenly trivial or like it couldn't prove anything. Then he opened my photo highlights.

You should have seen his face. I wish I had a picture of how he looked, like he was trying to figure out an optical illusion I'd solidified and put in his hands, like I'd just tripped and spilled a pile of emeralds in his lap, like he'd never seen the stars and I'd taken him on a shuttle tour.

He asked me if they were real.

Kyeo knew the part that happened next. There had been the photos of the tofu shelf - and then Suor's shout, one of the last things he'd ever heard his father say - Sarham, crying, had said he'd come to Ibyabek *to meet Kyeo*, or someone like him, that he'd come out of that rich smiling universe of unimaginable luxury and set down all his conveniences and comforts to learn more about someone like Kyeo - and then the kiss goodbye. He set the lens aside; he would read it eventually. He didn't want to think about being kissed goodbye, not right now. They had thought they would never see each other again and they could easily have been right and it was awful. And after the kiss goodbye -

Kyeo rubbed his eye with his sleeve. "I don't want to read about the part where they hurt you."

"You don't have to," said Sarham. "I can scroll past that when you're up to it, if you want, or you can stop here, it's just the epilogue after... after."

"I might stop here." He cuddled up. He clung. He rubbed his hand up and down and up and down the length of Sarham's back. "For a while anyway."

"I don't exactly *want* to hear about how they hurt *you*," Sarham said. "But if it's ever something you want to talk about I'll listen. If your therapist isn't cutting it."

"I'm still not sure exactly what a therapist's job is. She called in a separate doctor to inject the voice-fixing thing," Kyeo said, touching his throat; the bandage had come off yesterday and there was just a fading puncture mark. "So her job isn't fixing my voice, and that is the most useful thing that she's done, and she's more useful than Dr. Dae was."

"They didn't tell you what a therapist's job is?" asked Sarham.

"I don't think so."

"Huh. Uh, your therapist is supposed to - listen to your feelings, and help you process them, and figure out how to address problems in your life and adjust to your circumstances and also sometimes they can identify specific conditions that cause those problems - like the spasmodic dysphonia, not like being a jujube - and then they can treat that or refer you to someone who can. Like those things you put under your tongue, plus the - whatever that was." Sarham tapped the puncture.

"Oh, Dr. Dae did tell me that he was there to listen to anything I had to say about my feelings," reflected Kyeo. "That just didn't sound like a job."

"I guess I can see why it might not."

"I believe he expected me to have more to say."

"You've got a kind of... odd way of looking at things, and things includes you, I guess. New one's better though, right?"

"I sang in the shower this morning," said Kyeo. "It wasn't - good, but I didn't run out of air in the middle of a phrase, or sound like I swallowed a truckload of sand."

"Can I -"

"Not yet. Not till I've learned how again." Kyeo kissed him. "Dr. Suji said maybe three weeks, if practice a lot."

Sarham nodded, and smiled a sweet, soft smile, and dug out his lens to send Kyeo's lens a pile of links to music sites.

Kyeo's skylace use class had included, "Don't read the comments," followed by, "That's advice, not a rule. Not only are you allowed to

read the comments, we don't have a way to tell if you do short of looking over your shoulders. However, usually comments on skylace are full of advertisements and scams and clutter, either because the adware happen to be winning against the moderation bots, or because there's no moderation at all. There are systems to try to make the best comments float to the top, but even with those, it's usually a waste of time."

Kyeo was not sure if the discussion forum on Sarham's site counted as "comments". But, while he didn't truly believe that the Crane Mountain staff had no way to monitor his lens, he did believe that they wouldn't make an issue about it unless something became egregious. They could have set a better trap if they wanted a trap, Kyeo could think of ten off the top of his head, and they could also have made not reading the comments an actual requirement and punished people occasionally for it.

So he meandered over to the discussion forum, which was marked with the credits for the people who wrote the basic structure and the creator of the maintenance bot and the designer of the color palette. Kyeo had resigned himself to figuring out how to live in a world where money was everywhere, but the tacky insistence everyone had on taking credit for everything they did, by name, in case one day they'd get money for it, was aesthetically objectionable. He scrolled past the acknowledgments and looked at the topic structures. Apparently "Stargazer" was its own section, which was sort of funny. There was no corresponding "Seeker" topic, but maybe that was dispersed more generally because Sarham had written the thing. There was "Ibyabek (Inner Sohaibek)", with subsections. Kyeo'd been going to read vainly about himself but instead he touched the politics subsection.

This is a quarantine section , warned a note under the header. If the moderation bot, Seeker, or an admin send your topic here, don't let it leak out. When starting new topics here you are, as a test of the idea, encouraged to use a nonce screenname to help keep all the

politics from turning into sitewide drama. Feedback on that experiment goes [here](#). This section bridges to the [Kularan-language version](#).

The term filter accepts "Ibyabek", "IS", "Inner Sohaibek", and their typos as interchangeable and you can set your output term [here](#) or see the original (default).

Kyeo looked up "nonce screenname", and figured out how to set his on this kind of forum, but didn't pick anything right away, anticipating that he wouldn't necessarily have anything to say here. Back to the forum.

demil zone outside inspection [part 3 of when will we ever shut up]

IS sexism SUMMARY ROUNDUP

econ 101, fuckers

quarantine for your low effort image edits

ritually scream at the Naar Am family here

ritually scream at the president to prove you can!!!

politics jokes go here, SOME of us like to have serious conversations, xenobird231

the teacher exchange is UNCONSCIONABLE

stop accepting defectors into OS!

someone explain the status/nepotism thing to me. how does that fit in??

Kyeo wondered if reading the comments was a waste of time because he would need five more years of skylace use classes to make sense of them and that wasn't considered part of Crane

Mountain's mandate. He stared blankly at the lens, then tapped the topic about defectors, supposing he'd have the context to follow any of it since he was one. Though he didn't care for the term.

stop accepting defectors into OS! [posted by nonce112]

Look, it's all well and good to daydream about taking Stargazer to a casino and turning him capitalist for the price of a stack of chips, or whatever you people are into this week,

(Kyeo blinked and looked up what a casino was and shook his head and went back.)

but the war started because *normal people like you and me* were seduced by the idea of re-making society via violent revolution. You think everybody from IS has realized that their result sucked? Yeah? 1) you're deluded 2) the ideal, not the result, is the dangerous part! The result is... Inner Sohaibek, an impotent planet crawling by on dying legacy tech that can't manufacture a passenger aircraft or even a roll of plastic wrap to save its life. It's not hiding under the bed and it might have another melter hididng somewhere but it's more likely to accidentally melt itself than us. But the *idea* that if you somehow did it perfectly, if you put someone better than a Naar Am in charge and if everyone tried a little harder, then it'd be worth doing, worth killing people over, *that's* the thing that melted Old Sohaibek.

Daydream all you want. Inner Sohaibekans aren't happy here. They're traumatized disasters with no skills or friends or prospects and they don't like it here or anywhere, you can't fix them, and when they notice they're not actually satisfied and content, they'll wonder why, and some of them are going to think: ah, it's because I need to start a revolution.

Inner Sohaibek was settled by completely normal people like you and me. You can't be too careful.

Kyeo debated, at this point, the wisdom of reading the rest of the ensuing conversation. But he debated while he scrolled further.

re: stop accepting... [posted by nonce9090] I think it's irresponsible to have ANY conversation about whether to accept defectors without mentioning the sabotage at White Creek Park OR the Nebula Dragon documents OR the Southland reactor.

re: stop accepting... [posted by nonce222222222] It's completely possible for Inner Sohaibek defectors to be bad immigrants even if they don't start revolutions OR commit espionage/sabotage. Like, just read any randomly selected post on see:thisISbad.

re: stop accepting... [posted by nonce58] your source is a see:?

re: stop accepting... [posted by nonce222222222] see: is popular because it's a great interface and community. I'm sick of people dismissing see: citations out of hand just because millions of people use it - ANYTHING millions of people use will have its high profile embarrassments. It's not actually a worse source for being popular. For example, I believe everything your little sister tells me.

modBOT says This incident has been logged to the nonce nicks experiment tracker.

Kyeo put his lens down. He could go look up all those things. Or he could read the rest of the thread. Or he could go read a different thread. Or he could go follow up on what Hoon had told him to read to learn about the anti-defector sentiment, which might have been selected to make... any sense.

What he actually did was tap see:thisISbad.

This landed him on a captioned image which was labeled "Most see:n Today", though the ones below he wasn't looking directly at were shifting in place as new entries appeared and received votes. The picture was of a man - ethnically local to the system, but Kyeo couldn't be sure by looking that he was actually Ibyabekan - scolding a child. It wasn't clear if the child was his or not. The caption said *This guy was yelling at my niece for breaking her catbot and for having a catbot to begin with in the same breath. Poison people hate fun and hate kids. Vote to tell my brother in law NOT to leave niecelet with his Inner better-not-be-best-"friend" again!* The top rated subordinate remarks were *make him apologize to that baby and replace her catbot!* and *stock photo alert and put down the camera and hug your niece, what the fuck .*

Kyeo was certainly receiving a lot of information but he didn't know what to do with any of it. All the skylace use classes in the world couldn't explain this. Maybe if he moved to Xeren and learned the language from scratch and insisted on practicing his literacy on random skylace content every day he could learn it. It wasn't clear there was any other way.

He could, he observed, follow one of Sarham's links to a music site and learn a new song and practice. Or he could open the Outer Sohaibekan trivia game he had been assigned as homework and try to remember how taxes worked. Or he could go eat second-snack, which would only be served for another fifteen minutes. Or he could

-

- scroll down the see: about how much people hated Ibyabekans, apparently.

This lady actually DEFENDED the Paeuk abduction. Vote to tell her BRING HIM HOME.

Poison came to my daughter's dental practice and won't pay the bill. What do you think: sexist or just thinks dentists should work for

free? Vote to knock his teeth out again.

Vote to protest the New Orbit push to present to VULNERABLE CHILDREN

My son was taught in a West Gorge school (!) that the IS are victims because their elections are fake. Vote to remind him that they revolutionized themselves into this and they can revolutionize themselves out any time they feel like it.

vote if you hate her face

Vote to reverse the Second Virtual Circuit decision requiring ordinary people to let poison into ordinary groups. Don't want to have to listen to all the accents in my granddaughter's Wilderness Explorers troop.

Vote to remind pro-defectors that those defectors are just ASKING for IS to TORTURE their FAMILIES. The more merciful option is to send them all home until they learn to stay put!

The Crane Mountain classes had mentioned that last rumor, early on. Nobody on Ibyabek believed it, it would be not only out of step with their experience of people vanishing from Ibaybek but also philosophically incoherent. But they were being instructed in believing a lot of things they hadn't before, and apparently before they'd added to the curriculum, some people had run into people saying such things on the skylace and panicked. Cheong had told everyone that as far as they could tell, Ibaybek ("Inner Sohaibek") actually didn't practice punishing people's families. Sometimes they were under extra surveillance, lest people send coyotes back for their relatives, but they didn't vanish into camps or mass graves over someone hopping a ship.

Everything else on the screen he had no context for at all.

Kyeo had a pad of paper Dr. Suji had given him in case he had any moments of awkward speech while he adjusted to the new tension in his throat. He started making a list on it, not so much because he knew what he'd then do with the list as to see if it would turn his aimless scrolling into a tedious research project he could stop at will. It helped. Mostly because he started backing up to jot down terms from the previous pages till he was back on Sarham's memoir, staring at *like he was trying to figure out an optical illusion I'd solidified and put in his hands* .

Kyeo preferred the optical-illusion phenomenon, that sense that the world beyond his grasp was mostly tiled with wonders too incredible to comprehend. He had had enough of the feeling that he'd just been cranked through a pasta machine and overcooked. He set the list aside. With some effort he also set the lens aside. He made it, just barely, to the last minute of the second snack, and felt a little better afterwards.

But he kept going back, over the course of the week, to the skylace, and adding terms to the list. On his pad, longhand, so he didn't have to navigate away from those strangely compelling walls of information he didn't know how to understand yet in order to look things up. Maybe he'd look them up later. Maybe he'd decide it didn't matter. Maybe a protester from see: [thisISbad](#) would melt Crane Mountain into slag, and then it *really* wouldn't matter.

The fate of the list was still undecided when Sarham came the next weekend. It sat on the nightstand, turned to page three, while he watched Sarham arrive on his bicycle and lock it in place. Kyeo met him at the entrance with a kiss and they spent four minutes in the courtyard talking about a student performance of a play Sarham had seen before they got too cold and went back in to Kyeo's room.

"What's that?"

"Things I found on the skylace," said Kyeo.

Sarham flipped through it. "New Orbit... *catbots* ... *Paeuk abduction* , what have you been reading..."

"A lot of things. I don't understand most of it."

"Do you want me to explain any of this?"

"I don't know how much of it is actually important."

"Catbots admittedly aren't very important. New Orbit's a defector's organization, they'll be useful for you to get to know once you're out of Crane Mountain. The Paeuk abduction was a... kidnapping... where did you find this?"

"A 'see'. ...I don't know how to pronounce the punctuation mark."

"You skip it. There are lots of see:s."

"I think that one I found on one that is entirely about hating Ibyabekans."

"...Kyeo, why were you reading a see: about hating Ibyabekans?"

Kyeo's reasons for doing this had been somewhat lost in the shuffle, but he tried to reconstruct it. "I think I found a link on your forum. I was looking in the politics section."

"Oh no," said Sarham.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I have to have a politics section or people will talk about it *everywhere* but I don't *like* having it and I don't think it's a good use of your time."

"I don't have very much else to do."

"No? Aren't you still in classes and stuff?" Sarham asked. "Plus your vocal practice."

"Yes, but the classes aren't all day, and I can't overtrain, I have to build back up my stamina gradually. So I have a lot of empty time."

"If I'd known you were bored and supposed to take it slowly on the singing I would have sent you more links. Better ones. Ones that aren't see:s."

"Like what?"

"Like - I don't know, photography portfolios. Linguistics blogs. The economics cartoons my school friends all have tacked to their bedposts. Stories and movies and games. If you asked me 'hey Sarham, what's more of a waste of time, spending all afternoon reading see: or spending all afternoon playing Best In Show: Greyhound, I wouldn't know what to tell you, but if you're specifically winding up on see:s that are about *people who hate your background* -"

"I have also found one about giraffes."

Sarham pushed his hair back from his forehead, laughing ruefully, and hugged Kyeo. "The one about giraffes is probably fine. I know you have a lot to orient to and - sometimes politics stuff feels really important to be oriented to, more than it actually is, even to people who are used to it, and you aren't, I get that, but - you don't have to read see:s about politics, or the politics section on my forum. Not while you're still taking classes on how to - what is it most recently -"

"Ordering food from restaurants. They say most people do that if they aren't going out to the restaurant."

"Usually, yeah. You barely save money cooking for yourself and most people can't do better than a chef and a kitchenful of sousbots. I've

been assuming you don't cook -"

"No. My mother cooked, and taught Aipen, but not me."

"Because you're a guy."

"Yes."

Sarham shook his head. "Well, you can learn if you ever want to but you'll have lots of company if you just get noodle soup dropped off on your windowsill every day. What else is up?"

"The family is leaving soon," Kyeo said. "Next week. And so is Dalun. They passed their test." He reached into his pocket for a Quick Calm.

"- what's wrong -"

Kyeo put the tab under his tongue. "Sometimes I need one of those to not have a panic attack," he said.

"Yes, I know - what were you going to have one about, though?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're going to miss Dalun?" guessed Sarham.

"She said she would visit." Kyeo wasn't looking quite at him. "I will probably see her a lot. She does not plan to try to get a job or enroll in a school right away, besides talking to someone who is writing a book."

"Yyyyes," said Sarham. "That all sounds perfectly reasonable and exactly what I'd expect to happen, which is why it's weird that you're lying."

"That's really what Dalun told me."

"Do you think *she's* lying," said Sarham, "and that you're helping her prop up some face-saving illusion of integrating happily into Outer Sohaibekan society while actually you expect something awful to happen to her - are you expecting to make up excuses for why she doesn't visit, week after week, till nobody asks any more -"

"No," said Kyeo, and his tab was fully dissolved under his tongue, and he had a papery taste instead of the shakes, but that didn't make the word less bleak and pathetic sounding.

Sarham tugged Kyeo over into a hug. "I don't know how often she'll come over and say hi," he said. "If I were cooped up somewhere like this for months I'd want to get some space from it. But you have her address, right? You can write her. And you'll get out too and you can chase her down if you want then - you don't think *you'll* disappear, do you, Kyeo? - do you?"

"I don't know," Kyeo murmured into the space behind Sarham's ear.

"I won't let you," Sarham promised. "I will turn up the day they let you out if I have to retake an exam to do it, with a trailer on my bike for you to sit in, and tote you downtown myself. I will take you out to dinner and then bring you to your apartment at the New Orbit transitional housing building and dump housewarming presents in your lap and so help me if you don't stop me I will literally tuck you into bed and kiss you goodnight and come make sure you're still there in the morning. You won't disappear."

Kyeo clung and didn't say anything.

"If people who came through Crane Mountain disappeared," Sarham said, "the protesters wouldn't bother. It would be a huge waste of time."

Kyeo *guessed* that was true, but the idea that the protests were *not* a huge waste of time wasn't that much better. "They aren't?"

"- I mean, they'd be a really obvious waste of time, if no Ibyabekans were ever released into the general population," said Sarham. "I don't think they're actually making a big impact on policy, they just think they might get somewhere or want to register their disapproval symbolically or something."

"Are there," Kyeo said, after another silence, "actually Old Sohaibekans, around somewhere, seeking refuge on Ibyabek -"

"- no. Uh, I guess something like that might have happened in the first few months or years after the war if they happened to be on ships then..."

"In my lifetime."

"No."

"I had heard there were."

Sarham didn't answer right away. "I... think I'm getting the picture," said Sarham, "though tell me if I've unfolded the puzzlebox wrong, all right? You were told there were Old Sohaibekan refugees on Ibyabek, and there aren't; so maybe the protesters have been told there were Ibyabekan refugees out and about on Outer Sohaibek, even if that isn't true. Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"But think about how many different things people say on the skylace. You've been bopping around all over it reading ill-advised politics threads. If someone made up a story about there being Ibyabekans around, then all the talk about that would trace back to that one person saying it. But it *isn't* the case that every commenter links to some press release about the President saying 'we have some defectors around'. Instead they have sources all over the place, they're noticing accents and New Orbit activity and book publications and stuff like that. Also, even when you're still stuck in

Crane Mountain you have some exposure to the planet. You have unmetered skylace access and field trips and visitation - Dalun has that friend who went to the museum with us and you have me and whatnot. Your chaperone didn't try to get me not to upload your picture. Someone would notice if nobody ever actually popped up again after they passed their exit test!"

"What could you do about it, though," Kyeo said, "if you rode up with the bike trailer and they said - that they put me on a bus first thing in the morning and I was already gone, perhaps."

"I mean, I'd send you a message."

"Then what?"

"If you didn't answer? I mean, I know where New Orbit will put you - and - and if I went there and they told me you didn't want to see me - maybe I'd ask Dalun if you were okay, she'll have been out for a while by then. If I couldn't get ahold of her either I'd probably tell my dad."

Wulaar might be important enough to get attention, if not to personally make demands of the leadership of a planet he didn't work for or with. Kyeo clung harder anyway, though, not quite shaking the sense of unease.

"You'll be okay," murmured Sarham. "You'll see. Please don't be scared, you'll see."

Dalun sent back photographs of her apartment. A New Orbit volunteer had taken her on a shopping trip and she'd covered the wall with butterfly stickers, clothed the bed in purple plaid, and stocked the kitchenette with peanut butter and six flavors of instant congee and microwaveable stew and a variety pack of tea. She sent a picture of a drone leaving breakfast at her window, and of herself sitting on the edge of a fountain in the neighborhood square, and of

herself and her friend trying on outfits. She said she was getting used to doing math problems to fit things into her stipend.

Kyeo no longer expected to disappear, but that meant he would instead keep existing, and he didn't know what he was supposed to do about that.

He eventually decided to see if Dr. Suji knew. She said, "Imagine it's a year from now."

Kyeo obediently incremented his mental calendar.

"You wake up in the morning in your New Orbit apartment," she said. "What does it look like?"

"I guess like Dalun's," he said. "They're probably all the same."

"The floorplan can be like Dalun's," agreed Dr. Suji. "What else?"

"I don't think I would put butterflies on the wall."

"What would you put on the wall?"

Kyeo imagined a wall. Imagined as many kinds of stickers to choose from as there had been lens designs. "Stars."

"What are you going to have for breakfast?"

He was going to have to decide that too, wasn't he. "Isn't there a way to just get whatever some place happens to have?"

"You can order a 'surprise' from some restaurants, yes, but for the purposes of this exercise pick something."

"Eggs," he said at random.

Dr. Suji made him invent more details about his future day in his future transitional apartment with stars on the wall, and places he'd

go from there, and things he'd do in them, and he filled it in somewhat indiscriminately, picking and choosing out of things he'd seen on the skylace or heard about from Sarham or just wondered if they existed only to find that they did. He would go to that art museum again and read the placards this time and figure out why the frozen cake - he would learn to ride a bicycle, since Sarham liked it so much - he would sing, properly, because he'd be able to do that by then -

"Did that help?" Dr. Suji asked, when he'd filled the day.

"Maybe," said Kyeo.

"What parts didn't it help with so much?"

"...In one year I will still have my New Orbit stipend. But not in ten, or maybe even five - I am not sure how they decide."

"So you're worried about needing to get a job."

"Yes."

"I'd like to tell you that singing is a job - it is, in fact, but most people who like to sing can't make a good income doing it and you shouldn't pin your hopes on it. On Inner Sohaibek you were in the military, did you like that?"

"It was fine," said Kyeo.

"Outer Sohaibek has a military too, and though there'll be a waiting period before you can enlist in it, your New Orbit stipend won't run out before that time. There's a market for interviews about life on Inner Sohaibek, though that's also something it's hard to make a living at. You could learn to do something completely different, though. You could work on television shows or train dogs or supervise construction robots or fix plumbing or distribute parking permits or repair drones or do landscaping or level-design lens

games. You have time to learn to do something. And you can pick what something it is, the same way you picked eggs for breakfast, even if the decision takes more time and research."

"Why can't most people who like to sing make a good income singing?" Kyeo asked.

"A lot of people really like it, and it scales very well - one person singing can be recorded and listened to by millions or billions of people," Dr. Suji said. "Unlike, say, walking dogs, which is not an especially popular job and requires a separate dog walker for each neighborhood's worth of dogs, or teaching children, which is popular but - at least for a high-feedback in-person education, which most people want for their kids if they can get it - requires a separate teacher for each class of kids. It's normal for this to be hard to think clearly about," she added. "Even for people who grew up with it. And I'm not going to tell you that you shouldn't try to sell some music; you absolutely can. But you should have other ideas in case that one doesn't work well."

Kyeo nodded. He wondered what Dalun would do, when she got a job. What Sarham would do, out of school, with his degree in economics.

What he would do, with his singing voice and no job skills whatsoever.

Kyeo decided mid-week that his voice was better by enough that he could be heard by other parties. He got Hoon to show him how to record sound on his lens, and sang through the Anthem of the Bright Way, and listened to it, and decided it would be all right to send to Sarham.

Sarham replied two hours later: !!!! <3

Kyeo asked Hoon what the symbols meant and Hoon told him his boyfriend was being a sap. Kyeo blinked at him. Hoon elaborated that it was supposed to be shaped like a heart and represented affection. Kyeo said that wasn't what a heart was shaped like. Hoon said this was one of those things Kyeo was going to have to pick up through exposure.

Kyeo figured out how to type one back at Sarham, and then he went through all the other songs he knew, and some of the ones from the skylace that he had to practice a lot before he could sing them straight through correctly.

When he sent *those* to Sarham before he went to bed, Sarham said - the following morning - *I should show you how to set up a site.*

That was a sort of intimidating prospect, but maybe in a good way.

On the weekend Sarham did most of the work of getting the songs up. "Do you want a picture of you up? A lot of music sites have pictures of the musician."

"If you think I should."

"It's sort of a balance of, is it a big deal if people recognize you if this gets popular, is it a big deal if people swipe the picture and edit it to - make nasty posts on see: or something, versus do you want people who actually like the music to know what you look like, do you want it to have an easy visual handle for when it's flying around the skylace and a plain audio snippet would be harder to identify without putting in enough time to listen."

Kyeo looked at him.

"How much would it bother you if the picture turned up on see: in a month with something nasty written on it?" Sarham said.

"I stopped reading see: when you said it wasn't a good idea."

"Does that mean not very much?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll take a picture. I brought the camera drone, let's go out in the courtyard."

Sarham took a bunch of pictures, posing Kyeo this way and that, which was sort of fun. Kyeo had tried to make specific facial expressions before, of course, but that was communicative, not artistic. He imitated various other singers Sarham looked up to show him till he had a hybrid posture Sarham said was good and the drone took a good shot.

"If my father sees this he'll know I'm alive," Kyeo noted, while Sarham added text and filters to the picture. "I look different - fatter mostly - and it's been a few years since we spoke but he'd recognize me -"

"Is that bad?"

"I think he'd rather I was dead honorably."

"Would he see it?"

"He has skylace access. I don't know why he'd look at a music site and it'll say 'Stargazer', not 'Kyeo Sebe Luk' though."

"He probably won't see it but I can put stronger filters on, make you less recognizable."

"Yes."

So Kyeo's picture got softer, bluer, more indistinct, till he was sure that with the intervening years and meals his father would assume he was some similar-looking Outer Sohaibekan. Sarham slapped it on all the music files and set the background a few shades closer to

indigo to match. "Ironically," Sarham said, "one of the best ways to popularize music is on see:. But, like, nice well moderated music ones, not the ones bigots hang out on."

"Should I do that?"

"I can, I already have an account. - you didn't make an account, did you -"

"I almost did."

"How come?"

"Someone wanted to know why Outer Sohaibek spends so much money on integrating Ibyabekans and I wanted to say that I was confused about that too, but that wouldn't have been a very substantive comment and there wasn't anything else I wanted to say."

Sarham giggled. "I love you."

"I love you too," Kyeo replied, just like in the romance film Cheong had shown the Crane Mountain residents on movie night.

Sarham beamed at him, and kissed him, and that was just like the movie, too, satisfying and beautiful and full of music.

Kyeo met the new people coming in, when coyotes got out another family or asteroid miner or defecting soldier, and he studied and he read and he attended all his appointments. And he made plans, hundreds of them, flimsy things that would tear like tissue paper at the slightest counterpressure but were enough to hold up to his mind's eye and read off if he needed a map.

He recorded music, and he assembled a wishlist of decor, and he perused scandalizing articles about what exactly he and Sarham

might theoretically do in the conjugal visit room (or, later, in one or the other apartment), and he went on his field trips. It occurred to him one day that he might just be able to search "frozen cake art" and find out what that was about and there it was, on the skylace, as though it mattered, as though it was worth someone's time to make available to him an explanation of the frozen cake. It was a terrible explanation and he didn't understand it at all but somehow that didn't make it any less delightful that it existed.

He got a bank account for his New Orbit stipend to go in, and signed up for all the obligatory subscriptions and services. He looked at job training advertisements for work in translation and security and boating, considered applying to any of hundreds of factories and offices, wryly imagined himself supervising robots making bricks. He had time, though. He didn't have to line up a start date immediately.

He passed his integration test and made arrangements to see Dr. Suji as an outpatient on a less intense schedule and received his Outer Sohaibek citizen credentials. Sarham put him in his bicycle trailer and crooned along, badly, while Kyeo sang them all the way into Starport.

They stuck stars on his wall. Sarham took him out for chicken noodle stirfry and caramel ice cream, and tucked him in.

And in the morning, he checked, and Kyeo was still there.

Chaser 6

Chaser 6 applauded Vince as he bowed and stepped off the stage. When the noise died down, she blinked out of the concert environment to meet him in his suite. Not the Vince who'd given the performance; that thread was presumably back to practicing. A different Vince. "That was awesome!" she cried, flinging her arms around him.

"Thanks!" Vince said, squeezing her. "- the concert, right? Timing suggests concert."

"Yes, the concert, if I were talking about the coding marathon I would have come in fifteen minutes ago."

"Well, thanks. Hey, Kendra - are you Friend or Chaser -"

"Chaser," Chaser 6 said. "Do you want a Friend? I can spin one up."

"Either's fine," Vince assured her. "I just like to know. You partition differently from me."

"Well, all of me thinks that was awesome and wants to jump your bones about it," said Chaser 6.

"No bleedthrough!" he said in tones of mock scandal. "I'm *Social*. I do entertaining and parties and I don't perv on the guests."

"Fine," she said, rolling her eyes, "I'll have my people call your people."

There was a sound of giggling from the next room of the suite.

"No bleedthrough," said Chaser 6, "but no soundproofing either? Vince, it costs zero dollars. Why is your suite even a building?"

"It's homey. Isn't 'Chaser' basically synonymous with 'voyeur', anyway?"

"No, it's a completely different mode! Honestly if I keep listening to ourselves from the next room it's going to make Lover self-conscious." Chaser 6 shook her head. "Congrats on the recital. - and use more tongue over there." She presented him with a fist, he bumped it, and she blinked away to her own suite.

Music picked up; it wasn't Vince's, just something Songs had marked as "work tunes". She went back to her reading. Linda was cross-promoting highlights from her demoscene buddies' portfolios; Chaser 6 picked two to watch. Joel had a new movie out, and that she watched from beginning to end, twice, so she could write him a good review for him and whichever Friend instance to discuss the next time they met. Kim and Blaine had announced their wedding! She marked that on her calendar for Friend 4, who was free on the correct date. Weddings were a Friend thing more than a Chaser thing. Elaine had a new blog post and Chaser 6 left two comments. Then it was time to go watch Zeke's skiing competition. When Zeke took a fall, Chaser 6 swapped out of the environment for Parent 1 to console them about the loss.

Now, where was she - well, Lover 1 was *still* over at Vince's. Chaser 6 snorted at herself; she was insatiable. A lot of people had only one sex thread, or folded the purpose in with sleep or a multipurpose romance instance.

Oh well. They cost zero dollars. If Kendra wanted three of her to literally never have to get out of bed, nobody was going to tell her to stop.

Chaser 6 switched feeds. Her gardening club was passing around a meme about flowers; she dug up some pictures from Gardener 2 to add a couple of her own. (Gardener 1 worked in unassisted physics, which was satisfying in its own way, but the photos were less

impressive.) "That's not a dahlia, THIS is a dahlia," she giggled to herself.

The music changed; Songs was up to something. The memory took a split second to integrate - ah, Songs had looked into something Chaser 2 had flagged for her earlier in the week. *This* was Vince's stuff. Chaser 6 bobbed her head to the rhythm.

Meanwhile, Chaser 5 felt like dropping out of real-time chat to catch up on asynchronous news; Chaser 6 rotated in for her, seamlessly, no noticeable delay, and wrote:

you can't possibly be serious! and he bought that? chocolatesauce I think you might have been benefiting from less than his full attention there. was it a half projection?

I didn't check but I think he doesn't do halves said chocolatesauce.

One of these days someKendra would learn chocolatesauce's real name. Or, she supposed, learn that chocolatesauce's closest friends and family members called them "chocolatesauce". She displayed herself under the handle KendraKathleenDoppler everywhere, though some people, including chocolatesauce, called her "kkd". *Yeah me either* she wrote.

nobody should do halves, what's the point? wondered victoryroad11. *show up or don't!*

some people just don't want to show up all that much said tortoisebeetle. *my cousin didn't show up to my wedding!*

my cousin Daniel Chaser 6 started typing - and then she shoved the whole conversation to Chaser 1, who was between tasks. Chaser 1 recalled all the context Chasers 6 and 5 had on the conversation. Pushing it to another thread wouldn't mean Chaser 6 would miss anything; she'd collect it with all her threads' experiences as they rolled in. But only Chaser 6 had felt, and had continuity with, the

spark of curiosity in its full immediate form, instead of low-distraction background memory weave that every Kendra thread got. So Chaser 6 would be the one to follow up.

Where the heck was cousin Daniel?

Daniel *had* attended Kendra's wedding. Daniel had attended both her and Zeke's birthday parties up until two years ago. And then he had declined one, and skipped the next, and the next, and she hadn't really figured she'd bother inviting him to her next bash, because he clearly didn't feel like showing up anymore, even halfway.

But she hadn't heard anything from him since he'd gone quiet, or anything *about* him, and he was her *cousin*. She kept up with his side of the family. Aunt Val had spent a whole weekend with Gardener 1, fighting blackberry and mint invasions and trying to convince her that even if you worked in unassisted physics you could still turn the difficulty down. Daniel's sister Molly had taught Songs the niche musical notation that was catching on among brass instrument players. And Daniel hadn't come up.

Chaser 6 skimmed through old messages, sent little long-fingered scripts into her history to see when the last time anyone had said anything about Daniel was. There were false positives, other Daniels she knew or that her friends knew, but just a couple mentions that were probably him: he'd been to Molly's suite to meet her new dog, and he'd congratulated Zeke on their first handfasting, though he hadn't actually blinked into the event.

So he... existed, and hadn't cut off his entire family, but that didn't give her much to go on.

She wrote Molly: *Hey, I haven't heard from Daniel in a while. Is he mad at me or something?*

Molly had a message-handling instance and replied with admirable promptness. *He's not mad at you that I know of, he's just running fewer threads these days and dropping a lot of balls. If you really want him to come to something or other you can tell him it'd mean a lot to you, that usually works for me.*

Kendra didn't actually have anything she specifically needed her cousin Daniel for. Zeke's second handfasting was coming up, but if Zeke really wanted any given cousin to be present they were old enough to manage that alone. Kendra had not keenly felt the loss of Daniel's presence. She just wanted to know what he was up to. Specifically, Chaser 6 wanted that; the Chasers were all spun up from the desire to keep tabs on the fashions and trajectories around her, to be up on everything that everyone she cared about was doing. Kendra cared about him, so Chaser 6 wanted to know what he was doing.

Well, the simplest way to address this was to write him and hope he found time for it without the magic words "it'd mean a lot".

Hey, Daniel, it's been a while since I've seen you anywhere. Molly says you're running fewer threads? Partitioning issue or something? We should catch up sometime if you have the chance!

Daniel did not have a dedicated message-handler thread. Chaser 6 returned to her feeds. She voted in the poll to choose her dance group's next project, left approving sparkles on some of Zeke's sketches, and spent long enough staring at a chess problem to kick it over to the central thread and move on. She sent RSVPs and fiddled with her notification settings and talked herself out of getting into a political argument with friends-of-friends. She advised Vince on what spectacles, nose, and facial hair to put on his new avatar for his RPG thread. She re-watched the best scene of Joel's movie to settle an argument breaking out under her review.

Daniel answered her.

I've pared way down. You could call it a partitioning issue but it's not a typical one. Do you want to come over? I'm free now.

So Chaser 6 blinked into Daniel's suite, but found herself shunted into a visitors' vestibule. Some people set it up like that if they didn't like sharing their main areas with visitors; Zeke had done it for a while in their teens. Chaser 6 tapped her foot and looked around. It was sparse, she thought - not like he was going for a minimalist aesthetic, just like he hadn't spent much time designing the place. The plants and furniture and lights were all pulled straight out of a catalog, she thought. She remembered Daniel as having a really nice suite, but back then she didn't think he'd had a vestibule; it could be new.

He joined her after a moment. "Hi, Kendra. It's been too long, thanks for coming."

"Hey, Daniel. Do you want partitioning advice? I know everyone's different, but I think I'm pretty good at it as far as that goes."

He shook his head. "I'm not partitioning anymore."

"...at *all*? You're not doing *anything* else?"

"Nothing else. - I understand if you're uncomfortable, some people are."

Was she uncomfortable? Not especially, she decided. She could see why someone might be - it was perhaps high-pressure to make good use of a hundred percent of a person's time and attention. At this very moment Lover 1 was twirling Vince's hair around her finger and trying to force various words to rhyme with his name and if that had been all Vince was doing she would feel ridiculous about it. But Daniel had invited her here, she didn't plan to monopolize hours of his life, and she did really want to find out what was up. She shook her head. "It's okay, if that's how you want it, but go ahead and shoo me if you have another appointment - that sounds so hectic,

though. You'd have to drop everything whenever anything came up. What went wrong with your partitions?"

Daniel shrugged. "I think they worked as well for me as anyone else. I had, oh, thirty at peak, trying to be a food critic and a base jumper and a poet and a dozen other things all at the same time. I got all the way through my reading list - used to think I'd never do it."

But, apparently, he'd since given up on nearly every hobby he'd ever touched - or scaled them back to nothing - "And then?"

"I have a reading list again." He smiled, mostly with the left half of his mouth, making a little joke at his own expense. "You ever try to get into meditation?"

"I went to a mini-retreat once. They had some neat posture tips but I didn't really get into it."

"Did the mini-retreat require you to be all there?" he asked.

Kendra shook her head again. "Is that something they often require?"

"Not if they want thriving attendance. It's usually too much commitment for people," said Daniel. "Even just putting your other threads to sleep - it's a lot to give up. They do usually want central threads, not generalized hobby instances or even meditation-specific ones."

"Yeah, they did want that."

"Threads are locked into the right mood," said Daniel. "But first you have to get there, right?"

"Chasers like this aren't hard for me to spin up," said Chaser 6. "It's a pretty low-energy state, keeping up with things, poking around. *Gardeners*, now, those were hard, I *love* gardening but it was a real

challenge to get into a flow state on it long enough to spin off the instances, I was so relieved the first time I managed it that I made four all at once even though it turned out I only really wanted two for keeps."

"And I bet your gardens are gorgeous," he said. "But your Gardeners never eat, never sleep, never see your friends -"

"Sometimes they see gardening-amenable friends. And taste the vegetables."

"Sure," he allowed. "And while your center thread tried to meditate, the Gardeners gardened, and the Chasers read feeds, and whoever else you've got - what *are* you doing right now?"

"Uh," said Chaser 6, "having sex, sleeping, eating an ice cream sundae, catching up on blogs and chats, reading, more reading, marathoning the directorial output of Gretel G. K. and taking notes for a paper I'm going to write on that, gardening, composing a cantata with Vince, comforting my friend Vireo through her breakup, tripping on LSD, solving a puzzle in my LARP, organizing my old photos, getting a massage, teaching my kid a new chess opening, making a sculpture, giving my kid relationship advice, doing a crossword, finding the best remix of one of the songs from a Gretel G.K. film, arguing about whose entry in the Christmas light display contest was best, learning a new chainmail stitch, picking out outfits for all of me, petting my friend's new kitten, drilling some dance steps with the group -"

Daniel was nodding. "If you had to pick one, what would you pick?"

"Oh, boy," said Chaser 6, sucking in a breath through her teeth. "...I guess I'd stick with Vireo, since she just got dumped."

"Probably a lot of what you're doing there is showing her you care by showing up," Daniel said. "If there was just one of you and that one of you came when she told you the news..."

"But I couldn't stay," said Chaser 6. "I can be there as long as she wants, we're having a whole sad ice cream party about it with Vireo and me and five other people, but if there were only one of me, I'd have to go when something else time-sensitive came up."

"That's true. I'm not trying to say there's no cost to living like I do," Daniel said. "But - I've found it works better for me to *always* aim to be *totally* present in whatever I'm doing. Which is hard enough with one thread! Entire organic lifetimes have been spent on the pursuit! And I think it might be downright impossible, when - I know the memory weave isn't *distracting* per se, or I would feel much more awkward about having this conversation while you are by your own admission having sex. I know that this Chaser-Kendra is here right now. But your *awareness* isn't just of this room and this conversation. It wouldn't work as well if it were - most of your threads would be annoyed all the time about not being the one to do whatever the most interesting thing any of you were doing was, it has to feel like you're not missing out. What is that most interesting thing, right now -"

"Definitely the LSD trip," said Chaser 6, "but I wouldn't actually want to be doing that all the time, it's not very compatible with other things. If you don't count that it's the cantata - but I wouldn't want to ditch Zeke over that, they're my *kid* -"

"I didn't prune everything all at once," said Daniel. "Well, no, I did, to try it out, and then I spun up a couple temporary threads to taper down more gently. You wind up with a lot of commitments when there's thirty or forty of you. I didn't ever specifically have a thread for LSD, admittedly..."

"It's not specifically for LSD, I try all kinds of things."

"Sure." Daniel leaned back, crossed his ankles. "But I found myself making a lot of choices along the lines of what you're talking about, cantata versus your kid, how much of yourself do you really want to

spend on a drug trip. Weighing what's interesting and what's fulfilling and what's absorbing. And I pruned and scaled back. Learned a lot about myself, in a way I think would've been impossible if I weren't going all the way down to -" He gestured at himself. His center thread, central to nothing. "I went cold turkey when I had the insight about what was holding back my meditation practice - a few threads, generic ones, to wrap up some loose ends - and here I am. I'm sorry if you've been missing me, but I prefer it this way."

Chaser 6 nodded.

The central *Kendra* thread checked her schedule.

It was tight, but she didn't actually have anything scheduled literally on top of anything else in the next week and a half - or, nothing that she couldn't cancel or reschedule, anyway. Most of her stuff didn't have deadlines.

"That's interesting," said Chaser 6. "- were you scared?"

"A little," said Daniel.

"Thanks for making time for me," said Chaser 6. Daniel smiled, and clasped her hand, and blinked out.

Chaser 6 took a deep breath in Daniel's empty vestibule, and ceased to exist.

After Chaser 6 folded in, Kendra halted States in the middle of her drug trip. Ended every Stories thread when they came to the ends of their books or their films. Songs came to a stopping place in the cantata and bade Vince goodbye and disappeared. Gardeners 1 and 2 saved their gardens' states. Nostalgia marked her place in the scrapbook project. Artist threads set down their tools. Friends and

Parents and Chasers and Lovers and every other thread mid-social-engagement excused themselves and left, to arrive - nowhere. Kendra threads departed beds and workshops and auditoriums and parks and parlors. Muted feeds and turned up the filter on all her notifications.

Kendra returned to Vireo's sad ice cream party a moment after Friend 1 had stepped out of it. She had been about to explain to Vireo that now she was more fully present, but it occurred to her that this would be a really awkward time to bring it up. Even if Vireo would have appreciated it if she'd known as a background fact about Kendra that there was only one of her, Kendra didn't want to turn the sad ice cream party into a Kendra's-life-choices ice cream party. She ate another bowl of ice cream, wrestled with the feeling that this was in fact not one of the top ten most interesting things she could be doing, hugged Vireo. When someone else needed their participating instance for another use, Kendra took the excuse to go too.

Her Student 2 had put down an article she'd been reading on flying foxes. Kendra picked that back up; she had to be well-read to be on the panel when that happened. She was distracted by the desire to change her curtains, but that could wait; the ones with winged lemons on were fine. She got to the end of the article. It was maybe a little less fun when she wasn't pinned into Student mode for the purpose, but she could probably get used to it.

She had a new message from Daniel, which made it through her tighter filters. *There are some communities specifically for people who live single-threaded*, he'd written. And then a list.

Honestly, some of them looked downright culty, when she skimmed their public presences. It was the sort of snap judgment she'd usually follow up on, but, well, she didn't have as much time on her hands this way. She skipped past the ones that looked like cults.

There was a city for people who didn't run any side threads. They called it Unity. She would have been shunted out if she'd tried to visit outside of designated tourism days, before, but now she qualified for entry.

Kendra appreciated cities. Most of her threads had their own rooms or non-room setups in her suite, without a physical bridge between them, but she had had one thread who lived in a city and went for walks to get to places in the city. Her City instance had fed ducks in the park, and run into people by chance on the street, and attended live performances, and sipped coffee at little tables on the sidewalk, and gone grocery shopping so as to stroll home again, picturesquely, with celery stalks and a baguette protruding out of a paper bag. She'd voted on changes to the common spaces, and it was a fun social puzzle in a way decorating her own suite wasn't. City had been a thread just for the kind of life Kendra had fantasized about in graduate school before she uploaded.

Unity was... different from where she'd lived. Partly just because they were different cities. Neuropolis had been brickish, the streets curvy and shaded with trees, residential sections giving way to open-air markets and the theater district and rows of restaurants. Every other home had windowboxes of herbs or flowers and some of them had old-fashioned fire escapes on the sides and there was a cute little tram that wove through the downtown.

Unity wasn't what Kendra would have pictured if she'd been imagining a city full of people like Daniel who were really into meditating. She wasn't, admittedly, sure if Daniel lived here - it was only one of several possible reasons she might have been dropped in his vestibule instead of in his actual suite. Maybe he did have a place among the glass towers, many of them identical, foresting the grid of roads.

It wasn't crowded. Kendra couldn't tell if the apartments were occupied, but the streets were empty, and that was fair enough,

since she couldn't see much at street level worth walking to. Some kind of restaurant with umbrella'd tables out front - fine for meeting over lunch, which if she squinted through the window people were actually doing, but not very atmospheric. A park that nobody had installed any ducks in. A big concrete fountain with water tumbling over it. The weather was the breezeless seventy-degree boilerplate of an environment no one had ever granted a climate. It looked sort of like someone had imagined a city all on their own, on a deadline, with tools out of a children's video game, without ever editing it once they'd blown it up to full size and made it possible to walk through.

Still, it was a city. And Kendra was only seeing a little slice of it, since she didn't have time to look around the whole place. It was just as well they didn't have tour guides here. She'd have had to beg off to go to her child's handfasting.

Zeke had allocated three spots for Kendra in the seating chart so she could sit next to multiple groups of party guests, but when she got there, she had to pick one. She could join a set of Zeke and the bride (were they called brides, at handfastings? she couldn't look it up with a side thread), or she could go with her parents, or she could meet up with some family friends. Unable to do all three today, she sat with Zeke. The day was about them and their lovely Miroya. And she didn't need to worry about crowding them, when there were six of them here.

The ceremony was long and elaborate. Zeke had always loved formal, intricate rituals with a hundred things that could go wrong, so they could revel in getting every one of them right. Kendra tried not to drift too much into reminiscing about Zeke as a little child, when they'd set up arcane stuffed animal courts and spend hours on fictive coronation ceremonies. That was a suitable handfasting occupation for *one* thread - maybe one who wasn't even in attendance. Was that what Daniel had been talking about? The way she found herself trying to concentrate on the present moment, the

series of vows, the looks on every one of Zeke's faces as they finally embraced all their Miroyas?

Zeke had told her once that they and Miroya planned to handfast at least six or seven times before getting married outright. Maybe next time or the time after it would be easier to aim her eyes, to ignore side conversations, to contain all her excitement and pride in one fun-sized mind.

When she'd RSVPed, she'd expected to send three threads, and made menu selections accordingly. She had to clarify with the catering which entrée she still wanted. The decision was easier than the one about which table to join, but it still itched. It wasn't that she would have no other opportunities to eat pork medallions. She had all the time in the world. It was such a trivial thing to itch about.

Kendra ate her salmon.

"Mom," said Zeke, after the flow of well-wishers had slowed enough that they had a thread to spare from hugging everyone and thanking them for coming, "where's the rest of you? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," Kendra assured them, patting their hand. "I'm trying something new. Still getting used to it."

"Only attending events once?"

"Pretty much. I would have told you but it was sort of an impulse thing. But I'd never have let anything keep me from being here." She hugged them, and hugged Miroya, and let them go when a grandparent tapped their elbow.

The festivities went on and on, even after the formal celebrations were in the past. Kendra excused herself early. She had other places to go and other things to do, some of them very tightly squeezed, and she set about doing them, one after the other.

Kendra wanted to stay after the official end of the flying fox panel. Some of the other panelists were going to visit actual flying foxes, not just simulations; they were downloading threads into organics, which Kendra hadn't done much of. Organics sweated and their feet started hurting after long enough and it was also a hassle to get one the same shape as one's normal avatar, so she wound up in ones that had the wrong center of gravity or, once, a male body, which was uncomfortable. But it would have been fun with her scientist friends, luring and examining real bats. She just didn't have time. She'd told Vince she'd be at the memorial for his grandfather.

It was, again, an occasion where it would be wholly inappropriate to turn up announcing the virtue of her single-threaded presence. And she'd never met his grandfather, which at the moment made her feel kind of stupid about having agreed to come. Maybe this was why Daniel had missed both Zeke's handfastings - he'd never met Miroya, he didn't hang out with Zeke much, it didn't feel like an occurrence close to his heart.

But she'd promised Vince, and wasn't going to tell him - not *now*, while he was having his designated day to be choked up about his grandfather - that she wanted to go play with bats instead.

Vince sent only one thread to the memorial himself. Vince was probably not doing a whole lot else, this being a very solemn occasion. But he might be practicing music, reading, napping, even if he wasn't having sex or throwing wild parties contemporaneously while talking about his grandfather.

"It's been ninety years now," Vince said, when everyone was gathered. "In ten years I'll do this again... and maybe then I'll scale back to every fifty, or every hundred. But I'm never going to forget Grandpa Jack. We didn't get here soon enough. I know there were billions of people who didn't make it. My grandmother isn't the only widow out there. But Grandpa Jack was - the one I met."

He had a slideshow. Some of the people in attendance had clearly seen it before. They were polite, but they had the look of folks receiving data about the more interesting things their other threads were up to. Kendra hadn't seen the pictures before, though. She tried to devote her attention fully to Jack's photos, to Vince's commentary, to be fully there.

"Grandpa Jack used to declare moments of silence, at times like this," Vince said. "Sometimes as a joke. A dropped muffin - a moment of silence. A canceled TV show - a moment of silence. A flyer on a telephone pole for a lost cat, belonging to someone he'd never meet..." Vince took a deep breath. "But in more serious situations he'd suggest it too. He liked to say it was all-purpose, interfaith solemnity. I'd like to call for a moment of silence now."

Kendra bowed her head.

This was probably when Daniel would expect her to have some sublime experience of perfect wholeness - if he didn't expect her to have done it by finding time to meditate for eight hours in a row, anyway. It wasn't unlike meditating. She was silent and contemplative with all of the Kendra there was, all at once.

She wanted to catch a flying fox.

No, no, focus, Vince's grandfather was dead, that was awful.

(She was *never* going to find time to garden like this.)

Vince looked so sad. Kendra wanted to hug him, to pull this sad thread aside and take him out for wine on a boat on a lake with stars overhead. Ask him about Grandpa Jack, be introduced to the corresponding grandmother, send a Student thread on a hunt through the academic literature on the feasibility of rescue simulation.

The moment of silence ended. Vince's cousin sang a song, with Vince accompanying. Vince's niece read a poem. Kendra - wanted to be here, but it wasn't one of the main beats of her life. *Vince himself* wasn't only here.

The memorial ended. She blinked into her suite.

Maybe Daniel had had some profound revelation when he'd pared down to one. Maybe Daniel hadn't threaded sensibly in the first place, locked them into the wrong moods and flows. Maybe he'd had too many, or hadn't been willing to sleep them when they weren't busy. Maybe he'd loaded up on threads dedicated to things he didn't care about at all, and needed a hard limit on how much he could do, before he could say no to those invitations. Maybe Daniel was just a very different person from Kendra.

Kendra couldn't have all her threads back at once. They'd be better than nothing if she loaded them from backup state, but they wouldn't be quite in step. She had to refresh most of them every year or two anyway to maintain them in good order, since her center thread drifted and the exact quality of the ideal moods for her to be in for all her activities changed.

So. New threads.

The easiest from here - she started with a Parent instance, just one. She didn't really need two anymore, Zeke could take care of themselves. Kendra pulled up video of Zeke as a little kicking baby, as a stuffed animal celebrant, as two of them for the first time when they'd learned to thread. Zeke threads in Dino Park and Neuro Disney and Witchcraftland and Candy Kingdom. Zeke's birthday parties, fourteen with all their friends packing laser guns and seventeen at the ski resort and twenty-one a nice sedate dinner at home with family and twenty-five when Miroya entered the picture -

When she had it, that tender maternal focus, she spun off Parent, and off Parent ran to apologize for getting her journey of self-

discovery in the way of Zeke's perfectly arranged seating chart. Good. She felt better already.

She wanted to take Vince out on a boat - there, that would do for one Friend instance, if her other friends needed slightly differently focused moods she could make more later.

She re-read the recaps of her LARP, spun up a thread for the next session - she walked through her gardens, unfroze them so she could wince whenever she caught a weed and know it wasn't going anywhere unless she did something about it - weeded, pruned, watered - pinched off Gardeners 1 and 2, bam, bam. Ate one of her orchard's apples, ordered up a whole sideboard of desserts, spun off an Epicure. Put on the recording of the last time her dance troupe had performed, kicked up her heels, danced away another thread. Poured music into the environment until she was crooning along, itching to look up the sheet music and find out what the progressions behind the key change looked like, and there she was, Songs.

And that was all well and good, but she was so far behind - so much must have happened while she'd been doing this experiment -

Chasers bloomed, eleven of them all at once, bubbling with hedonistic excitement about catching up with everything that had been going on during Kendra's diminishment; they separated into their own parts of the suite to read chat backscroll, chew through blog archive. They flitted off to events and performances in all conceptual directions.

The Chasers assigned themselves numbers, because it was easier to track which of them were covering which tasks when they were individually labeled. Numbers were arbitrary, but less ephemeral than "the one who sat in on chamber choir rehearsal" or "the one who's been reading all the drama about outfit plagiarism".

However meaningless the numbers, it occurred to Chaser 6 that she had a connection to the thread who'd started the whole thing.

Chaser 6 snorted and dove into a chat with her friends. When Daniel's followup message came, weeks later, she sent him a polite apology that she would not be able to join him in Unity for lunch. But if he wanted to catch up, he could come over to her place any time.

She had better things to do, but she was doing them.

Starwink

This story is a commissioned re-write of Eliezer Yudkowsky's [That Alien Message](#).

Haruto was running late, a thermos of tea in one hand and a shoe he hadn't gotten on yet in the other as he stepped into the elevator. His phone started buzzing, and he ignored it. It started *ringing*, which it was only allowed to do for select people, and he wrestled his shoe on and checked who it was. It was his old professor, not someone who would be calling to tell him that his father was in the hospital. Tanaka-sensei hadn't contacted him in years. He only still had the ability to ring the phone because Haruto had never bothered to change it, not since he was waiting for updates about his thesis. He stuffed the phone back in his pocket and speedwalked out of his apartment building, making for the subway.

Over the course of the subway ride Haruto noticed that everyone else was looking at their phone, too. This was such a mundane observation that at first he didn't know what he was noticing. Of course everyone was on their phone.

He added it up, between the second and third stops. He didn't hear any of the little mobile games that people refused to mute. People were showing their phones to their neighbors. There were collisions, as people exited and entered without looking where they were going instead of politely cramming themselves in where there least failed to be space.

Haruto pulled out his phone rather than shoulder-surf his neighbor, and had a lot of accumulated messages and news alerts.

The stars are winking! It's aliens! read a text from his ex-girlfriend.

Mystery in the sky, said a headline brought up by an algorithm's understanding of his list of interest topics.

Tanaka-sensei's text, sent after the call hadn't gone through, just said *Check the school's astronomy channel*.

Haruto wished the old man had been more explanatory - he had to download the app the school used for departmental discussions, since he'd never had it on this phone - but by the time he got off at his stop, he was catching up on the last eight hours of astronomy department chatter.

Apparently, as seen from all around the globe, the stars were, in fact... winking.

The first several had to be identified in retrospect from telescopic recordings, and many were of stars in the daylight direction of the Earth as it turned and the stars winked irrespectively, but a few were spotted with the naked eye. Someone had gone to their amateur astronomy forum about two conveniently in the same constellation only thirty seconds apart, and someone else had confirmed that those stars had respectively brightened and dimmed at about those times, and two independent reports was enough to get a few other people poking around. The news had gained speed until it was confirmed by astronomers with serious telescopes, redundant recordings checked against each other. Here someone's aesthetic timelapse, there someone's staging of UFO footage.

One star per second had been winking, bright or dim, star after star, for hours now, and Haruto couldn't shake the sense he was being pranked, even after source upon source made it clear that none of the people actually sending him messages were the pranksters. These people didn't know each other. The people he was passing on the street, looking at videos of flashing stars on their phones, were not in on a conspiracy. But the alternative was so preposterous -

He reached his sister's apartment ten minutes late, didn't bring up the stars with anyone else there - if they'd heard about it, they were choosing to set it aside to greet his newborn niece instead. He held the baby for an appropriate amount of time, handed her off when she fussed. Hugged his sister. Accepted a snack, since he hadn't had much breakfast.

And went back out onto the street to look at his phone a bit more, for more clues.

Haruto could guess why his ex-girlfriend had thought to text him. And he knew what he'd been reading that gave the news algorithms the idea that he'd like to hear about the stars (if they weren't just telling literally everyone). What he wasn't sure of was Tanaka-sensei's intent. He looked for a quiet place, but there was nowhere he'd be able to hear a phone call clearly enough. He texted back, grumbling his way to the subway station again.

Sensei, why are you telling me?

The reply didn't come until Haruto was back home, debating taking a shower to get all the subway residue off of himself. The phone chirped.

A funder wants to get the drop on founding an organization dedicated to figuring it all out, in case it's strange enough that it's not in any existing wheelhouse. He doesn't think NASA or whoever is going to figure this out in the next week and wants to look cool if his people get it instead, but he doesn't have people on tap for this. Asked me for suggestions. I don't know what you're doing these days but I didn't find you on any university's faculty list, Kobayashi. Busy?

Haruto ground his teeth. Decided in favor of a shower. Popped out five minutes later and, still toweling water out of his hair with one hand, replied with the other:

How much funding?

"Hajimemashite," said Shelley. "Namae wa, um, Sheri. Douzo yor-"

"I speak English, Ms. Katz," said Haruto. "Everyone here does. We start it in elementary school." His accent was substantial, but she could understand him with a little extra effort, and didn't have to pause to fumble for particles and wait until the end of every sentence for a verb, this way.

"Oh, thank God," she said. "They said Japanese was a nice to have and not a requirement, but -"

"You're in math, you peak in five years. We'd like to use this time on the real problem. I am confident the messengers do not speak Japanese. I hope you did not waste too much of your time on it."

"Not... *too* much time," said Shelley sheepishly.

"Well, stop. If you're good at languages, then you can pick it up by exposure in your spare time. If you don't, you don't. Have you seen the sequence?"

"Uh."

"A lot of people have. It is not very hard to find if you look for it. Is that an 'um, yes, even though I wasn't supposed to' or an 'um, no, I followed the rules and now I'm wondering if that was a test of my initiative'?"

"The second one," said Shelley. "All I've seen was one actual starwink during the second message. It was Ashlesha. Epsilon Hydrae."

"I'll stick you in group 2 of your cohort, then, though being in a group doesn't affect much of your preliminary work since the idea

for signal-naive cryptographers is that you're to look at it with fresh eyes. You are not to contaminate each other with any observations until we've wrung all the freshness out of those eyes, do you understand? Don't even tell them about Epsilon Hydrae."

"Yes, Mr. Kobayashi."

"Welcome to Starwink. Come with me."

She followed him through the corridor to the elevator; it brought them up to his office. The place wasn't much to look at. Rented office space, boring plants no one would be allergic to, tasteful neutral carpet and wallpaper. They spent money on personnel, not on frontage and architecture. Shelley's HR onboarding meeting, before she'd even been sent to meet Mr. Kobayashi, had included strict instructions that if she found herself fretting about any financial, bureaucratic, or logistical problem, she was to immediately take it to the Starwink concierge department, explain in full, and expect it to be resolved satisfactorily on her behalf without any further drain on her mental resources. Her take-home pay was substantial, but the real perk was how badly they wanted her brain freed up to work on the most important problem in the world.

Haruto sat down behind his desk. Shelley sat opposite him.

"Describe to me the Starwink project as you understand it, as though I am a bright high schooler," he said. "No need to get very detailed; I'm looking for what angle you use to approach the problem, not how many Wikipedia articles you've memorized."

Shelley had been expecting this question. "Eleven years ago, stars started winking. It went on for about a month and a half, then stopped. The winking stars were all over the galaxy but every one was visible before brightening or dimming to the naked eye under ideal light and weather conditions from the surface of the Earth. The light conditions weren't ideal and actually about half the stars winked from the daylight direction of Earth as it was at the time they

did so, but there aren't any gaps that might belong to stars we don't have a clear *line* of sight to because of the moon or anything - gaps in the pattern of one star winking per second, I mean. Slightly more than a second."

"Does it matter that it's not exactly a second?" asked Haruto innocently.

"It might," said Shelley. "The message - it has to be a message - was sent by someone or something, and whether that someone or something *knows what a second is* could matter. So it matters that it's not exact - because that's evidence that they don't - but it also matters that it's really close, because that could mean that it does know. Which could mean lots of things, like that it's using an old - or even *future* - reckoning of a second that's slightly longer, or that there's some technical reason why this was as fast as they could go but they didn't choose longer intervals because this interval was so close to one of our measurements."

"Why does it have to be a message?"

"Light travels at a speed and the stars all winked at Earth on the same schedule. The timing isn't regular even from elsewhere in the Solar system, let alone from another star. To get to us on such strict intervals, the light from those stars has to have been altered with us in mind from the beginning. It's still a very weird way to send a message - those stars are incredibly far apart from each other, affecting them like that would be really difficult, and if they can get to all those stars there's no obvious reason they couldn't get to us here and like... hand us a roll of ticker tape, or a DVD, or something. But it's clearly under control, it's clearly *about* us, it hasn't... affected our weather patterns, or anything... so it's almost certainly communicative. I want to decode it."

"Tell me about that."

"Well, I haven't looked at it yet," she cast him a slightly annoyed look, "since you guys and all the others all have a conspiracy going where you say there's too much value in looking at it without preconceptions to have it flying around..."

"Mm-hm," Haruto said, unruffled.

"...so I don't have an angle specific to the starwink message's *content*, but I'm interested in coming up with creative ways to present the data, with various factors highlighted or smoothed out - for example, we don't yet know for sure if it matters *which stars*, is my understanding, so in the case that it doesn't you'll be able to get more flexible visualizations or audializations by treating it just as a string of bits, but I've come up with a few things for also displaying star-specific facts so something could pop out if there's anything there. I've worked with toy datasets that are actually encodings of episodes of My Little Pony and stuff like that."

"You do these yourself?"

"My brother helps me with some of the coding. He's a programmer, works for HMCF. But I generate all the spec myself, I can tell your guys just as easily how I want things to look."

"I don't know the acronym -?" said Haruto.

"I bet they have an equivalent organization in Japan but I don't - uh, it's Halt Melt Catch Fire, they study that thing that happens if you try to run a program that could make itself smarter and the computer slags itself, but so far I think their only public-facing result is the power plant and it's not actually more efficient than nuclear."

Haruto nodded. "All right. My assistant will show you to your office and get you set up and introduce you to the concierges and such."

"Thank you, Mr. Kobayashi."

"You will *use* the concierges," he told her firmly. "You will tell them as soon as you are inconvenienced. I don't care if you are inconvenienced by the air conditioning, your commute, our hardware, the time zone, your podiatrist, the government, or your bagel slicer. We hired you for your brain, we don't want to drive you insane, and that means that instead of taking extra hours out of your leisure time - let alone your *sleep* - we are taking them out of anything else that bothers you. The concierge department's job is to fix your problems. Complain to them."

"Thank you," repeated Shelley, and she let his assistant lead her away.

Shelley couldn't stop cackling in triumph. She knew it was immature, she knew it wasn't academically responsible, she knew that the people who'd thought the message was a cellular automaton were contributing a valuable diversity of perspective, but they'd been wrong and she was *right*. During the fourth day of the third message, she made the concierge department have cake and champagne and balloons ready for her in her apartment by the time she got home and invited over six Team 5-D Image co-workers. Two cakes, one for her and the other folks with globalized taste, and one for Jun and Yuuto who would prefer something with about a teaspoon of sugar in it.

Shelley cut the cakes and whooped with everyone else as the bits kept pouring in and her visualization, ticking along once every 1005 milliseconds on the screen that dominated her west wall, confirmed with each new starwink: it was a match for the theory that the messengers were sending frames of a video feed, projected down from five asymmetrical spatial dimensions. It wasn't "glorified Conway's Game of Life", as Yuuto'd derisively called the competing family of theories.

"You gotta wonder, though," said her colleague Okafor, "you gotta wonder, even more - the one thing the Conway people had going for them is that you could sort of wrap your head around why, if they were doing a cellular automaton, they'd do it with stars. Doesn't answer the question of why we're in the middle of it. But maybe stars would make a good automated substrate for it somehow if you nailed down star to star... ansibles, or something."

"And if they're just doing pictures why not send us physical media or even, if they really like the bitstream approach, aim a big flashlight?" said Shelley. "Yeah. Well, we'll -" She swigged her champagne. "We'll figure out what the pictures are of, and that'll help, I bet."

"If the gap's ten years again?" said Okafor. "How're we going to figure anything out at one frame a decade?"

"Well, maybe you and I'll be dead," said Shelley, "but somebody'll be around. You know how much money Starwink got dumped on it as soon as the second frame started up? Our endowment's not going anywhere. We'll figure it out. Humanity will."

"Yeah," he replied, "but... *I* wanted to figure it out."

"Yeah," she acknowledged. "That's a bummer. We can get pretty far on a few frames, though, with this much time to crunch them. Hey, did my brother get back to you about your cute algorithm idea?"

"Yeah," said Okafor. "He says it'll probably melt as I described it, but they might be able to tweak it so it doesn't, at least at the kinds of price points we can sling now, they've gotten better at predicting that for edge cases. If this message lasts as long as the last one did, we should be able to start assessing the forces that might be at work in Fiveworld as soon as the winks stop."

"I'm going to be so annoyed if Jun wins that bet," Shelley whispered.

Okafor clinked his glass to hers, but said, "I don't know, it'd simplify our lives, wouldn't it?"

"It'd be *boring* ."

"Nah, we could move on to figuring out what all the stuff in the pictures *is* . Are you going to send the leftover cake to the Fresh Eyes team?"

"What, as an ironic taunt? It wouldn't be very good irony. They're not getting leftovers. I respect them. I mean, I wouldn't want to be in data quarantine *with* them -"

"Of course not -"

"- but I'm glad they're doing it, like other people were glad I showed up on my first day and hadn't seen the bitstream."

"- so, welcome to Starwink," Shelley told the new guy, setting her cane down. "Do you have any questions?"

"Uh," said the new guy, "I understood why you don't necessarily put a really complete job description out in public, could be sensitive and all, but I got my more-complete job description and it's... sparse."

"Yes," said Shelley. "Your job's sparse. We get one new frame every ten years. They haven't surprised us with physics details since I was in my fifties. The organization doesn't have to be the big fancy think tank it once was. The Starwink I'm retiring from is more of an intellectual generation ship."

"Oh," he said.

"Your job - everyone remaining's job - is to make sure it can still be around in thousands or hundreds of thousands or maybe *millions* of years. You keep the tech up to date with the times, and make

actually sure that all the old data makes the transition - you hire redundant data-entry drones and parity check their work, if that's what it takes to get stuff moved - and that all the software ports forward functionally. You maintain backups like one day seventy things will all go wrong at once, because in that much time they *will* . You protect the organizational continuity - you move out of Japan if you have to, you clone the org if that ever looks like the best plan for all of our work surviving and continuing, you play politics if anyone starts looking threateningly at our endowment."

"I - right. Okay. Yes."

"This is *hard* . It has in point of fact never been done. By the time this organization is as old as Kongo Gumi, the oldest company ever in the world, had become at the time of its absorption in 2006? That is to say, in about fourteen hundred years? We'll have about a minute of video. And that's if the messengers like their frame rates the way silent films used to - physics team thinks they like it faster, so it might be thirty seconds of video by then, or less. The job is very hard and I hope to hell you can do it but it is - yes - very, *very* sparse. You will have a lot of down time. You were hired because we think you can do your job *right* even when on most days all it requires of you is that you pay the bills and knock off early."

He nodded. "- can I ask an irrelevant question?"

"Yes."

"Why the cane?"

"I like the look of it. I have the shoes too, but I just wouldn't feel like I was telegraphing being venerable as hard as I'd like with just those." She picked the cane up. "With that, I'm gonna knock off early. I'll be in every weekday for another six months and then I'm retiring to Fukuoka till it's time to freeze me."

"You're not going back to the States?" asked the new guy.

"And waste all that time I spent learning Japanese?" Shelley laughed, and she zoomed off on her support shoes and left him behind.

Starwink did not replace most of its retiring staff. It shrank. It waited.

It wasn't altogether idle. It retained a staff for operations, for accounting, for maintenance and upgrades, for compliance and legal needs, for translation, for cleaning the offices, for talking to the press. It continued to hire scientists, xenologists, mathematicians, mostly funding their work on their own interests while obliging them to respectably represent the think tank now and then in public. They were brought in with the understanding that when more messages came, every ten years, they'd drop what they were doing, integrate the new material, study any discrepancies their predecessors hadn't predicted, and make sure that they were ready for the next batch of bits in another decade.

And it invested.

Starwink didn't just need to continue to exist in some form under the same name, it needed the conditions under which it could do its slow work to persist, and those weren't necessarily going to happen by default. Starwink took its revenue from its endowment that didn't go to supporting its decimated staff, and it paid lobbyists to steer the governments presiding over each site it controlled.

In addition to its more conservative purchases, it bought up stock in longshot technology operations that would make future work on the bit patterns more productive if they panned out. Starwink paid for the development of, and then bought and ported their software onto, quantum computers that skirted the edge of melting when they ran. It bought into augmented reality toys that could train players to think in additional spatial dimensions: the next generation

of virtual pets and physics puzzles would prepare the next generation of scientists to consider the frames they were accumulating from the messengers. Starwink subsidized research into life extension, because every round of hiring it had to go through to replace its dying workforce was an opportunity for someone prone to sabotage or mere dereliction of duty to slip through, and prevent it from sticking around long enough to learn what it had to know. It looked into psychological screening tests to reduce that risk. It offered cryonic suspension to its pensioners as a perk to tilt the applicant pool that little bit more toward long time horizons.

Sometimes it gave seed capital to would-be sister organizations. The slog was too long, the project of too-universal import, for Starwink to care much who held the blue ribbon for first to the real answers. It would be just as good if Lightcone or Datachewer managed, and if something happened to Starwink despite its money and redundancies and exquisite care, it would be good for one of the others to step in.

Decades crawled by. Stars winked in late March, throughout April, and a few days of May, every year ending in 1, like clockwork. Every time, there was a brief flurry of activity, predictions were refined (by less and less), the backups were all carefully checked and incremented, and the state of the art in five-dimensional VR got one more frame for the viewing pleasure of the next batch of bright-eyed young things who wanted to know what the aliens had to say.

All was not quiet. There were a usual number of earthquakes and hurricanes. There were a diminishing quantity, but noisily-vacillating severity, of armed conflicts. Starwink kept its main staff spread out, and usually managed not to have anyone in a place at all when something seemed to be threatening. When a backup bunker was destroyed in a tsunami or an HR functionary got shot during an unexpected insurrection, the foundation fell back, bought more real estate, filled it with more hardware, ran more employment ads. It

dumped extra cash into nuclear disarmament initiatives, and then the initiatives to disarm other, more destructive things.

It launched a backup into orbit, and then dropped another one on the Moon, each taking in raw bitstream data from automated telescopes with each new message and beaming it, over and over, to any hypothetical radio receivers. Just in case anything happened to their global civilization and only a handful of people were left to rebuild something from the scraps and go find the lost frames later on.

The Earth lurched through movements and fashions; its people played politics and made art and studied things other than the Messengers' sidereal remarks. It would have been too much to expect for all of *academia*, let alone all of the dirt farmers and war refugees and uncontacted tribemembers, to prioritize whatever else they were doing below the long, unrewarding work of Starwink, holding their breaths to see what was next. They barely read the reports when they hit the media, and once-a-decade civic celebrations around the new frames flashing in didn't gain much traction in the public consciousness except as an excuse to eat seasonal desserts. Everyone was busy having children and inventing carefully this-side-of-melting technologies and solving problems closer to home.

Starwink, regardless, persisted.

Starwink waited and worked.

"Oh fuck, they're *stupid*," breathed Sauyen, staring into his VR, flicking through the settings to see the different renderings of the latest frame.

"Who, Telemetry?" asked Cadine from her chair across the room. "Do you want me to tell 'em that they didn't get the wink rendered right and need to redo it?"

"If Telemetry'd fucked up, I wouldn't be looking at a coherent picture," said Sauyen. "The Messengers. The *Messengers* are *stupid* ."

Cadine absently noted in her log that the 220th frame had made it through and confirmed the backup cron job. "That's nonsense, they can -"

"- wink the stars, yes, I'm *aware* ," snapped Sauyen. "I didn't say they were *weak* . I said they're *stupid* . These in the frame are two Messengers, I'm sure now - don't interrupt me, of course I'll do a proper defense of the assertion later but *I'm* sure. There's two in the frame and I do not think they're just minding their own business unaware that we're getting data. I think they're in fact trying to talk to us and have been *the whole time* ."

"But..." said Cadine. She'd always been a proponent of the idea that the Messengers had somehow done the equivalent of butt-dialing the Earth. "If they're actively trying to talk to us, then..."

"Then winking stars every ten years is a dumb as shit way to do it, yes," said Sauyen. He pulled off his headset, closed his eyes for a minute so he wouldn't be dizzy when he returned to viewing the 3D world. "We knew that. *Even if* the - apparent speed differential - is insurmountable, *even if* for some reason they don't have the precision or the intel they'd need to drop off a contemporary human data storage format and can't resolve that problem, they could have gotten a giant flashlight, or a few of them if they wanted coverage over the whole globe, and winked *that* . This was somehow the idea they came up with."

"It could still be some kind of limitation that isn't them being stupid," said Cadine. "Just because we assume that if they were *very very* smart they'd be able to figure out how to do the flashlight thing doesn't mean that this wasn't easier by enough that we can't assume they aren't pretty bright."

"No, listen," said Sauyen. "It's not just that the starwink was trying to talk to us all along. The images they're *sending* have been trying to talk to us all along. They are oriented toward our camera and aware that we are watching. Imagine you want to talk to an ant farm, and the ant farm is running more than three hundred million times faster than you, like our current ballpark guess for us versus the Messengers. You have in mind something you want to say, since this ant farm is your big important project. You can send them images. What do you do?"

"Uh," said Cadine. "Print it out in a small font and hold it up, I guess? If they're that fast they can probably decode some of it, by page two if not right away. Maybe I'd add an illustration if I were really pessimistic. And get a lot of my colleagues to do that in parallel too - never have a printer idle, never leave the visual field less than tiled with writing for a moment longer than it took to get a new page in place - they'd see enough between pages to derive anything they needed from looking at *me* -"

"Yeah," said Sauyen. "They're not doing that. They're - fucking - *miming* ."

There was a pause.

"You're kidding," she said.

"Nope. I think - "

Cadine opened her mouth.

"I'm *going* to write it and present it properly but you aren't on a virgin ears protocol so shut up and listen," said Sauyen. "I think they're stupid. I think their physics let them run us as easily as we'd run a cellular automaton. On modern hardware, not when they were first invented - we'd make it huge, we wouldn't supervise most of it at all -"

"Oh!" cried Cadine. "Oh, no, we're - we're easy to simulate for them? We've just been running for, what, a few weeks their time? *Evolution and all* - no, would take, uh, forty-five years, give or take, if it's the entire universe? But how would they pick up the simulation in the middle -?"

"It may have been running faster when it was less complex," said Sauyen. "Maybe it'd slow down more than they want to let it slow down, if we built something smarter than we are, and that's why AI attempts melt. So yeah, it's been running for some weeks or years, they've gotten around to miming at us since we passed some benchmark of clumsily measured but not really *analyzed* sophistication, and they're so, so stupid. And they don't know how smart they are in terms of that same metric. They don't know what that benchmark they picked *meant* or how much better we'd get at thinking if we aimed at a specific problem. Maybe it was a round fucking number."

"If they're so stupid, how did they build any computers, even if it happens that simulating our universe isn't *objectively* difficult on their physics?" Cadine asked.

"They're not *that* stupid? I guess?" said Sauyen, throwing up his hands.

"- you know what," she replied, "I bet being native to five dimensions is a huge advantage. Because it means that their networks will tend to just be physically denser. Even if they're much less likely to have a good idea, each individual, the ones who do have good ideas can be close to more other people, and pass them on, and have a higher chance of the idea running into other ideas it synergizes with, or applications it's good for, or inputs it needs to be a better idea."

"Mm," said Sauyen. "Maybe, although I'd expect the importance of that to diminish once they did have computers."

"Not necessarily," Cadine said, "if they're just psychologically architected well for collaborating due to having evolved under densely networked conditions. I mean, yes, it'd diminish, but it could still be helping them get over obstacles to development so they'll be doing better than a comparably intelligent population of 3-D humans. And if they're really this dumb, coasting on being able to have office neighbors in ten directions instead of six, then they could still be plenty dumb enough to mime at their simulation one frame every ten years." She paused. "Do you know what they're trying to mime?"

"I think they might use sign language," he said. "I think... that maybe one of them is holding a rock, or something that certainly doesn't have obvious non-rock points of interest, and the other one is pointing at it, and we're about to spend a thousand years learning to interpret the cheremes for 'rock'."

There was a silence.

"It wouldn't take a thousand of our years to do one word unless they have a *weirdly* slow language or 'rock' happens to be a very long word," ventured Cadine.

"Cadine," said Sauyen. "They're fucking *stupid*. I'm going to write up my predictions all formal-like, but just between you and me..."

"Mm?"

"...my prediction is they're going to repeat themselves a couple times."

"You're out of your mind," said Cadine.

"Look," said Sauyen, "now that we know that this isn't in fact the real world -"

"That's not -"

"- then," he said over her, "it only makes sense for everyone to bide our time until we can have effects in the real world."

"Listen," she said. "I can see your logic, but your proposal is insane. Yeah, you got the promotion, you sit in the big chair, but you're head of *Starwink*, not *the human species*. The human species isn't all going to tuck themselves into freezers on your say-so because *you think* we only need a handful of people awake at any given time."

"The freezers work fine," said Sauyen, confused. "They've been able to revive people who were frozen for Faber-Nilsson's Syndrome and fix them up since before you were born and it hasn't exactly gotten *less* reliable."

"That's not the point! Okay, for one thing, there's, like, still some Belizean Mennonites, the Fellowship of Halt, the Traditional Khoesan, all those types. They're not going into deep freeze peacefully and I don't think you're proposing to zoom over to where they're living with an artillery shuttle to bully them into it like some modern-day Autokrator Jabulani."

He snorted. "Okay. Nine Starwink clones and the luddites. I don't think we'll have trouble staying mutually irrelevant, do you?"

"Luddites aren't the only people who aren't going to drop their lives and cool off on your say-so. Some of them care about other things than acting in the Messenger's world! They want to raise kids, or to write symphonies, or to reconstruct interesting Cambrian life-forms and keep them as pets! For another thing, where did the number *nine* come from? You can't raise a human child in a population of nine and have them come out sane and ready to advance the state of the art."

"I don't think we should slim down to a population of nine *next week*, and I certainly don't think we should pick genomes for the project

at random. I think we should start raising clones of promising geniuses, and see who's reliably suited to being one of nine and raising more of the same."

"Starwink *employs* more than nine people *now* ."

"Yes, but most of those wouldn't be necessary if you start from the assumption that the whole world is luddite cults and nine genetically predictable Starwink staff. Wouldn't need lobbyists, wouldn't need HR, wouldn't need -"

"Just because you think the whole simulation we live in is purposeless unless it's Starwink doesn't mean the rest of the simulation will stop. The Messengers aren't keeping a close enough eye on us to help out if their physics sim throws an asteroid our way. Let alone if the biosphere sim throws something at your nine clones and none of them happen to have a natural resistance and none of them are research biologists because the only biology need you anticipated was handling repetitive stress injuries and decanting new clones!"

"I think nine is enough to cover what we need including emergency medical issues! It's the size of most interplanetary missions."

"Even trips to Neptune last so much less time than you're expecting this to have to go on," said Cadine. "And if they fail badly enough and they all nine of them die, they don't leave everybody except for some Mennonites frozen and unable to pick up where they left off."

"They could wake someone up out of the freezer for any unexpected problems," reasoned Sauyen.

"That's not going to help if there's anything going on they need to react to *quickly* . Whoever they wake up won't have context on the situation and might have to catch up on who knows how much linguistic drift just to receive an explanation. You need a live population - even if some of them are doing inefficient things by

your standards - to support Starwink. You can subsidize the heck out of deep freeze! Pour half the discretionary budget into building the freezers and the other half into advertising, if you want! *Absolutely* make sure people get frozen when they're a hundred and forty and starting to wear out, rather than losing their pattern! But you're not going to get *most people* to lie in wait for the only thing you think is important to wrap up in here."

"A large diverse population is *also* a vulnerability," insisted Sauyen. "We're not hunting for bugs in the simulation because it could get us shut down if we set off the wrong feedback loop in our substrate, which, may I remind you, was programmed by *morons* ; do you want to vouch that billions of future humans will all be that responsible? We haven't had a war in five hundred years, but do you think we can make it five million? It might *take* five million, before we know how to do *anything* , and if they then decide the communication channel they're letting us have is a fucking winky flashlight -"

"I'm telling you, you can try to convince people," said Cadine. "But I'd be surprised if you got better than thirty percent uptake - and that's me adjusting up from my gut estimate of two or three."

"That's better than nothing," Sauyen said. "But I hope you're wrong. You think the Messengers have us *backed up* ? I give it about even odds they just *forgot to do that* ."

"You're going to get frozen soon, right?" Cadine said. "You're getting on a bit."

"Yes," he said. "But I'm submitting my genome to the Long Haul clone team." He paused. "You should too."

"Oh, I did," she said.

"You did? I thought you said I was out of my mind."

"You are," she said. "And if this time I happen to be wrong, or if we just wind up doing clones alongside a regular human population, my sisters will be around to tell your brothers, for the next five million years, every time they're out of their minds."

They didn't get much uptake on the freezers at first. And they didn't slim down to nine individuals, not even after Cadine and Sauyen had both been frozen for a few centuries. There were kinks to work out: a Cadine clone whose predecessors had responded cooperatively to certain environments suddenly broke off from Starwink entirely, to pursue a career of 3D scanner photography of historic sites, and no one could figure out why (not for lack of impassioned explanations on her part). A Sauyen clone grew up so abrasive that no one could work with him and he was relegated to an unsupervised data science position in an otherwise empty Starwink satellite campus, attended by robots. Some lineages were even less tractable than that and they stopped decanting them altogether.

The warm and mobile and non-Starwink human population of Earth, irrepressibly, continued to live and work and reproduce. Sometimes there would appear a new person who proved themselves, submitted their sample to the Long Haul department, and ended their career under radiation shielding in a cryo facility, waiting for their distant twins to greet them with the news that it was time to break out of the box.

Humanity's demographic transition as originally understood had been over for some time, and the population's rate of change had fluctuated mostly with the ambient popularity of childrearing as a vocation - falling for a while, then climbing back up. Everything got cheaper; the economy outpaced even rather extravagant standards for the lives people wanted to give their children.

Sauyen's clones (when they were raised threading those psychological needles that left them interested in rendering opinions,

a skill the clones in charge of raising more clones got better at teaching their siblings to execute every generation) objected. "It's the opinion of Starwink that the simulation of our universe is not backed up," said one, trying his hand at public speaking. "The Messengers have us in a fishtank and it might not be water-tight. If anything happens to their hardware, or their funding, or their interest - if there is a bug in the simulation that we have yet to find, something that happens if we probe too hard at the Melting Threshold with increasingly elaborate nanotech designs, or start to run too many human minds at the same time, or try any exciting new idea - then we're gone. The time to settle down and have children is after we've resolved the situation - escaped from the simulation one way or the other, rendered ourselves into the Messengers' world or taken control of a well-run instance of our program. Some people need to do this work. Most add risk, and in having children raise the stakes beyond their already astronomical levels. It is still possible to die unpreservedly and the Messengers are not preserving you for us. I implore anyone who isn't contributing to the Starwink project to earnestly consider freezing themselves now, and expecting to be awakened when we know what's next for humanity."

It wasn't a very popular speech. It swayed a few, but not many. The reasoning went that if you weren't backed up, being frozen would not make you less not-backed-up. A shutdown would just catch you unawares, never having finished your epic poem or climbed Chhogori or made a regolith angel on the Moon. Hardly anyone had an irrecoverable accident before they were a hundred and forty, and they'd be just as frozen if they waited till then, while not having passed up the chance to marry their sweetheart who really wanted kids, nor postponed the cruise around the Arctic they were so looking forward to.

But the population did not keep rising: it dwindled, little by little, as some people chose the freezers earlier in life to see what they'd awaken to find, and their peers did not make up the difference.

It took a long time but Starwink had oh, *so* much time.

Starwink was not nine individuals. It was nine villages of thirty people each, supplemented by robots such that they didn't need to grow their own food or do their own laundry, but organically populated enough that the children didn't fall into weird undersocialized corners of their outcome space (and so that, if they did, there would be slack to replace their work while the strays pursued whatever other passion caught them at the wrong developmental milestone).

There were more people out of Starwink than in it. Luddites of various sorts, but also just the vestiges of communities resistant for whatever reason to the idea that they tuck themselves into liquid helium chill, yet perfectly willing to accept other tech. Mostly, Starwink didn't talk to them, though they collected all their news and had people looking at it, in case anything they needed to know came up. Sometimes they would adopt an idea that came from another community, but cautiously - *Luddite* wouldn't be the word, but the Starwink clones were all born with careful reams of instructions on their care and rearing, and it took generations to be really sure of the new protocols that ought to be observed around any sufficiently irregular update to their way of life.

The stars communicated, decade by decade, slow trickles of data. The Messengers mimed. Generations of clones brought up half in and half out of five-dimensional virtual reality interpreted the gestures, extrapolated from them, learned the things they were meant to learn and a thousand times more things they were not being taught. They speculated about the Messengers' evolutionary biology, their sociology, drawing inferences from the architecture of the room and the cheremes of the signs they were shown.

They waited to be told how to reply. The camera, if you cared to call it a camera, might not be fixed in a hardware sense, but they didn't

know how to refocus it. If their simulation could send output to a screen or a speaker, they didn't know how to connect to it. They had some guesses - but didn't dare try anything plausible, lest they spook the Messengers.

It wasn't obvious what they'd be able to do with the chance to reply. They had discussions of the subject, constantly, but every possibility was contingent on how much bandwidth they had, what they could aim it at, how much vocabulary they'd amass before the options opened up. The possibilities yielded by knowing how to say only a few dozen nouns and numbers, and then being asked to perform photo classification tasks, differed enormously from those they could pursue if they got unsecured wifi access.

"If they make us perform photo classification tasks..." said Milione. She was not actually Cadine's millionth clone, not quite, which was why no one else had jumped on the name before the one who'd named her.

"It won't take that long to classify a photo," said her friend Yinae.

"Sure, but I just don't know how we're going to break out in any only-infuriatingly-unreasonable time frame if our output is 'that's an alien bird' and 'that's not an alien bird'. I've sunk my whole life into this and the rest of it will go the same way. All of me have except the ones who get really into historical preservationism or opiates. I'm not saying I'd rather be into historical preservationism or opiates, that is to say I'd rather not that from my current vantage point, but if I get frozen and no one ever wakes me because there's never any good news because we're actually an overpowered engine for identifying alien bird photographs - and there's no gaps any of us can figure out how to wiggle through -!"

"I think even for dumbasses like the Messengers we'd be a little much if all they wanted was to identify birds. They're trying to teach

us natural language, even if they're going about it very foolishly," said Yinae. "They'll give us more rope to hang them with."

"More rope to what?"

"Sorry. One of my references." Yinae's lineage was less likely to run off to a non-Starwink village and make self-destructive interpersonal choices if they read a lot of historical fiction for some reason. "What I mean is - they'll screw up. They're stupid! We'll get there. You'll wake up and we'll have a huge party with all humanity."

"Not the ones who weren't frozen before they got brain damage," said Milione.

"Them too if the Messengers backed us up, or if the simulation's a reversible process we can run backwards to get rescue sims," said Yinae encouragingly. "I think there's better than fifty percent odds that at least one of those things is true."

"I don't think we'd wait on figuring out rescue simulations to have a we-broke-out party."

"Two parties, then," said Yinae. "Even better."

Sree8pn came to the end of the basic corpus they were attempting to demonstrate to the System. It should now have enough vocabulary (if it was really as science-fictionally smart as it was supposed to be) to understand their initial battery of questions, and understand their explanations of how to reply to those questions - especially, as necessary, with requests for more data. Obviously it wasn't going to be able to divine anything really complicated yet, but they didn't know *exactly* how much or what kind of facts it would need to tell them the right answers to the big questions. Sree8pn in particular was hoping it could figure out how to make queues at the grocery warehouse shorter, so their parent would spend less time exacerbating stress injuries while waiting for their staple allotment.

There was a limit to how much it could figure out from having a visual on the room it sat in. Sensory data didn't have *that* much information in it.

Sree8pn's partner Kun4o delivered the explanation for how to display replies on the holo. The holo lit up the barest instant later - it really was smart, wasn't it? It had been less than half an hour to run through the vocabulary. Sree8pn had expected they'd need to keep training it longer, but Kun4o had insisted on doing a check at this early stage.

A dimensional reduction of graceful tentacles, halfway between the appearances of Sree8pn herself and Kun4o, appeared already in motion. The System confirmed that it understood, and asked if there was anything it could access to read and learn more so it would be able to give better answers. It made a minor grammatical error, the sort of mistake Sree8pn would expect from another person who'd grown up in a different bubble of civilization and only learned the local sign recently. How deceptively personlike!

Kun4o agreeably explained how the System could configure itself to access the network, and remarked in an aside to Sree8pn that it was a good idea, actually, since signing all the information from the network to the System would have taken quite a long time, and it could probably read a little faster than that.

Sree8pn asked about the grocery warehouse queues. There was the barest pause, and the System - already much broader in its vocabulary than they'd taught it to be; maybe it was picking up online dictionaries - began to explain in gently stepwise terms some options it considered promising to approach the issue. Sree8pn liked the notion of issuing numbers representing one's place in line and signaling when one's number was up, but Kun4o was really interested in the concept of value tokens being used in trade for the food without any waiting in line at all. Of course, sometimes the System would say something silly, coming up with examples where

people might "buy" seedpods and suncatchers on the same day, even though that was obviously repulsive. It wasn't a god. It was just a machine with a lot of compute thrown at it that worked nice and fast, and might be smarter than some people on top of having a new perspective on what it learned, so sometimes it was silly. Kun4o and Sree8pn corrected it when it erred and it never made the same mistake twice.

They'd been running it for about forty hours when Kun4o noticed it was drawing *less* power than it had been before they started the training phase. The curve of how much energy it was using didn't match how hard it seemed to be "thinking" hardly at all. That was a little weird. They incorporated it into a footnote in their progress writeup. Maybe it was politely making itself more efficient so there would be more energy for everyone else.

Three civilizational bubbles away, a person called 7wgo *would* like to receive oodles of special perks at all their favorite participating institutions for just twenty minutes of simple work performed in the privacy of their own home, oh boy, did that ever sound great!

They got half a dozen vials in a few different packages from a few different bespoke chemical distributors. Each had a number and no other explanation printed on it, but the number was all they needed to follow their instructions. 7wgo put vial 1 in the kitchen particle agitator, and shook vial 2 thoroughly before combining it with vial 3, and added vial 1 when it was starting to dissipate its energy, and stirred well, and stuck it all in a bath of the contents of vial 4 diluted with household cleaner, with vials 5 and 6 combined and standing by next to the whole mess for later addition. They were going to need to get some more cleaner soon.

The goo in the tub looked awfully funny the next time 7wgo checked it. They dumped in the 5-and-6 combination, gave it all a whisk, and went to their job at the farm. Their farm was trying a peculiar new

scheme where the workers got tokens for working, and could trade shifts whenever they wanted if they waved enough tokens at the preexisting holder of the shift. The tokens were redeemable for various prizes at other places that were trying similar ideas, but were also pretty good just to have in case you needed to trade shifts. It was some idea some people far away had come up with using a computer somehow.

When 7wgo left for home their house wasn't there any more.

"It's going to have to be two parties," Milione said to Yinae, when they'd both read the briefing from the Ultimate Generation.

"We'll figure it out," said Yinae. "The Messengers aren't exactly going anywhere while we think."

Corridor

When Kim found the place it was empty.

She had sworn to herself that once she found it she'd never, ever leave, would never turn her back on it or pretend it hadn't happened, would never go home and pick up a fork or turn on the television or open a window like nothing had *happened*, but that's exactly what she did. Because when she'd made those promises she'd been expecting - not Narnia, Narnia was too circumscribed, Narnia did not grant Narnian green cards and invite you to stay for the rest of your life, but she'd been expecting Fairyland, or a Shadow Realm, and she would have settled on some days for a more atmospheric than practical Hell. She could do worse than to fall into a YA romance protagonist role with a demon cozying up to her, intrigued by her mortal charms.

But there was nothing there.

It took her four days, fuming about it to herself, snapping at her cat, crying into her Häagen-Dazs, before she went back to the side door behind the empty crepe place that no one had filled with anything since it closed six years back.

Just to see if it was still there, not to go in. It was not a place she could live. There was nothing there; her flashlight met walls just forty feet away past the threshold and not even a mote of dust drifted through the beam.

The crepe place was about twenty feet wide, its kitchen reached all the way to the back and this door should have been access from there to the trash alley, and beyond this building, its neighbor the bike shop did not extend that far back. The room couldn't exist. It was indisputably magic.

It was a lightless, windowless hallway with concrete floors and sides. She could use it as a glorified space-warping storage unit, she supposed.

She glared at it, willing it to turn into a verdant realm of adventure. For something to walk through the wall or drop through the ceiling, introduce itself, show her how to do it too so she could navigate its world.

It was a lightless, windowless hallway. Concrete.

She ground her teeth and stepped into it. Ignoring it hadn't helped make the whole thing any less unfair.

It at least felt something like passing through a magic portal ought to, like a curtain was brushing over her skin. The air was thin. The floor was hard, and cold enough to notice through her shoes.

There was still nothing there, no invisible universe waiting for her to take her first step into it before unveiling its splendor.

She went all the way to the far wall and laid her hand on it. It was cold, but warmed up as she stubbornly left her palm there, trying to derive some enjoyment from being in contact with literal magic and finding that there was none.

Kim turned off the flashlight and let her eyes adjust to the light there wasn't. Nothing had been waiting for that, either.

She could leave this place, open more doors, find a better one. If there was one, there might be more. Some might lead to proper fantasy lands. Populated, bright places where you bought witches' magic charms with gold coins and this highly space-efficient closet was something you saw every Tuesday.

She had opened a lot of doors in her life and this was the first magic one.

She might never find another.

Kim set down the flashlight on the floor. When she checked a moment later, prodding it with her foot, it was still there, having neither been stolen by goblins nor turned insubstantial by mysterious forces. There was just really *actually* nothing here, and she needed to stop letting her heart rate jump every time she breathed in case that was the right number of breaths to take to earn her ticket.

She waited in case accepting that there was nothing here was something's cue to surprise her.

She gave up on waiting, just for half a second. That didn't work either.

Why couldn't it have been a magic necklace in an inherited jewelry box, or a tunnel to a cave full of dragons, or -

Why was it a featureless corridor? Unnaturally clean, and not even quite that. It *had* been but she'd left footprints, tracked bits of mud in with her. This was the only magic she'd ever found in her whole life and she'd tracked mud into it and she couldn't even be horrified at herself about it because the magic was so pathetic.

Maybe the relative thinness of the air would power some kind of perpetual motion machine if she knew what to set up on either side of the threshold. That would be the wrong genre, but sort of okay. If she knew how to build a perpetual motion machine, or who to ask.

Kim sat in the corridor, shivering as the nonmagical but still considerable cold of the place sank into her. She sang songs. She recited the Fibonacci sequence. She took cellphone pictures of the place, with and without flash. She ran her fingers along all the edges of the room, between the walls, at the boundaries of the floor. Wasn't tall enough to reach the ceiling. Hadn't brought a stepladder

and was going to feel really stupid if there was a hidden trap door up there offering passage to where she really wanted to be.

She left. (She checked her watch against a clock on a nearby bank's marquee. Time had not dilated.) She tried the stepladder the next day. Nothing in the ceiling.

After that she didn't come back for a few weeks.

Kim had read once about a man whose wife had died because she couldn't get to a doctor fast enough. The only route had been around the mountains. He'd taken a chisel, and he'd gone out, and he'd started hacking away at those mountains. When he was done, there was a road straight to the town with the hospital.

His wife was already dead and nothing he did could save her.

But the next time something like it happened, there was a way to get to help, even though it took him twenty-two years of daily work with inadequate tools.

Kim went to the hardware store and bought an extension cord and hearing protection and everything else the guy who worked there recommended for her edited explanation of her purpose, and she rented a jackhammer.

Before she tried it she checked the soundproofing in the room, leaving her phone blasting the most obnoxious metal she could find streaming, the door propped wide open. It wasn't audible at all from past the threshold. Then she plugged everything in and put on earmuffs and took the business end of the jackhammer to one of the long walls.

Progress was slow. She made a little hole, then moved over and made another little hole, and so on and so forth. She did not get much done. But she'd proven the wall was destructible, and she

wasn't breaking through to the non-space-warped outside, either. She returned the rental and bought a jackhammer of her own. She'd expected them to be more expensive.

She chipped away at the wall every day for a week and a half. The room that had seemed so small and disappointing was much bigger when trying to renovate it. She gradually pockmarked the whole smooth cold wall, and learned to change the oil in her jackhammer, and then started hammering away at the bits between the holes. It felt bigger than it had but it wasn't big enough. It needed to be cavernous.

When she came back on the eleventh day, the wall was smooth again, and she couldn't think how to feel about that - it was reacting magically to what she was doing, it wasn't a perfectly static room, that was at least a *response*, a magic property other than the pressure differential and the warped space, but it was reverting back to its original size and shape, it wasn't going to be possible to fix it so the next person who needed to find a fantasy world at least got to explore a huge cave full of - she hadn't decided but at least something like the world's biggest diorama, something they could pretend fairies lived in -

The hall was wider.

It had smoothed itself out to the depth of the holes she'd made in it.

Kim burst into tears and picked up her jackhammer and got back to carving out her cavern.

The place got a little quicker about reacting to her changes over time. She could get an inch or two out of the walls in all directions with one hole in each, and they'd slightly curve the new editions depending on where she placed the holes - she was going for concave and generally drilled in the middles, but didn't want it to look too artificial so she mixed it up sometimes. It didn't look very

impressive day to day. But if she did it every afternoon for twenty-two years, like she was chiseling a road through a mountain, then even if it didn't get any faster or more malleable she'd have a cavern almost fifteen hundred feet across.

She marked out foot-wide half-ellipses in chalk, starting door width and expanding concentrically from there until she didn't have enough width, and drilled into those, a little deeper into each progressive one and the space beyond too. When she came back, the room hadn't figured it out; she drew another one, hammered a few more holes, and came back the next day to stairs as smooth as they would have been if a river had been running over them for centuries.

She added another stair every couple of days, since she wanted them broad and shallow. She hadn't decided yet how deep she wanted to go, but she thought it should be at least double the height of a normal flight of stairs, which would mean at least a hundred of them given how little depth each added.

She started experimenting, after a while, with what other suggestions the room would eventually get the hang of. She hauled a hose behind the building, found a spigot sticking out of the back of a bagel place, and in what was probably a form of water theft ran the hose down the stairs, as soon as they were steep enough and deep enough for this to make a pleasing trickle and not immediately flood the place. She didn't run it too long; she didn't want to make a huge puddle at the bottom. Just a small stream for a few minutes. It didn't get the idea right away. She waited for it to dry, storing her hose outside the room in the alley and assuming no one went out and decided to look for a garden hose to steal, then tried again. It finally figured out what she wanted after the third try: a perpetual flow of water down the stairs, not wide enough to make them all wet and slippery but plenty to make a pleasant burbling sound. The water disappeared at the bottom of the slope, which deepened every day.

She found a little piece of nice bluish granite at a gift shop and laid it on the steps, then propped it up against the wall. When she came back, there were six of them lying around. She sighed and hauled five of them out, then tried dragging the flat of the granite along the walls and the steps and removing it altogether. The next day she'd successfully turned all the surfaces to granite, which made them harder to jackhammer but she was now barely scratching each surface before moving on and expecting the place to get the hint.

She caught fireflies, in firefly season, and released a jarful, and when she came back there were more of them, and thereafter their number scaled with the gradually expanding volume of the cavern. She bought a bioluminescent plant online and placed it, and then there were more, in their own little loose piles of dirt she could shove to suitable locations; once she'd indicated where they belonged the cave embedded them deeper, grew them bigger and closer.

If she'd found this place, she would not have been disappointed right away. She would have been later - but it would have taken her longer.

The stairs grew into broader shallow terraces. The walls receded faster and faster, four and five inches disappearing from each side in a day. She added moss for texture, crickets for sound. She did not know how to catch an owl or a bat, but if any appeared conveniently to her she'd know what to do with them. She got a stepladder, perched it precariously across two steps near the door, and held up a dripping-wet cone shaped rock to the ceiling, and came back to a very satisfying array of stalactites. She got a little collection of semiprecious gem chips, scattered them like glitter down the stairs, and came back to jewels embedded in all the stone.

She decided to stop expanding the cavern as a whole once it was fifty feet wide. She made tunnels, drew them into the wall in chalk to clarify how they ought to be shaped and directed passages this

way and that, branching and twisting. She planned the whole thing out on paper, but the room was not yet quite savvy enough to pick up on what the floorplan meant. She had to scrub out its attempts at printing the map on the wall. That would spoil the mystery for whoever came next.

She put in dangling orchids. She bought a salt lamp; the ones the cave created, as she'd hoped, did not need batteries, and just glowed through lovely colored crystals sconced on the walls.

Kim still showed up to work, still even paid rent on her apartment - she could have turned the cave into a home but that wasn't what it was meant for. But her passion was the dig, the construction. She slept at home and worked at work and the rest of the time she was shopping for and crafting for and rearranging the cave. Her paycheck, after rent, went mostly to supplies to donate to her project. She'd convinced the cave to generate meals for her by showing it a compilation video of Star Trek replicators and then drawing a little alcove on the wall, and chipping away the unthematic sci-fi components and repeating the video as necessary until it worked plain, just an alcove that would appear any food she named. She did something similar to make a garbage disposal chute.

Months disappeared into the cave, then years. It glittered. She'd brought in a fog machine. She'd volunteered long enough at an animal rescue to get access to a little bat for the place and it had bats. There was a dollhouse village that took an entire summer all by itself to get just right.

When she'd been working on the cave for twenty-two years, it was a maze the size of a small town, three dimensions of pockets and tunnels both broad and cramped. She knew the place like the back of her hand, but to someone discovering it for the first time it would be dizzying, exciting, surprises around every corner. There were stained-glass windows to nowhere, mushrooms the size of dogs, a roomful of hundreds of hourglasses set into the wall turning

themselves over and over, a chessboard in ivory and ebony inlaid into floors, music that chimed and plinked to itself in sparse tunes that sometimes piled up into glorious harmonies, tiny nooks with the leftovers of imaginary civilizations.

It was beautiful.

It was a dead end.

If someone - Kim imagined a middle-schooler with untied sneakers and a backpack full of algebra homework - if someone found it now, they'd have a lot to see, a lot of magic to investigate. Something cool to show their friends. Years' worth of escapist entertainment before they realized the secret of the place, and Kim knew that was valuable as far as it went. But it just *wasn't* a fantasy kingdom like that kid deserved to find. That kid might have a good time adding to her work once they realized it had all been artificial, but that wasn't what she was trying to do, she wasn't trying to leave a truncated version of the real thing.

There was nobody in there but grayscale bats and rainbow fireflies. Singing crickets and giant moths. Snakes and mice and sparrows, which she'd coaxed into fantastic patterns of scale and fur and feather, but animals.

She went to her dollhouse village. She'd modified the original dollhouse a lot - taken out the stairs, put doors on the outside walls of the second and third stories and a door in the roof. She'd taken the backs off the tiny chairs. She'd painted everything, made little tweaks to all the architectural detailing, till the cave figured out the color palette she wanted and the style and produced more houses like that. It was a fairy village.

And she found those pictures of fairies that had fooled Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and a lot of fantasy art from the internet, and a coffee table book full of paintings of fairies, and left it all there atop the

tower of civic buildings in the center of town, and held her breath, and went out of her cave.

She didn't go back to retrieve the phone or the book or the photos right away. She had the idea of never going back at all, of letting the kid find it, letting the kid really be the first person to meet them. But she couldn't resist. She told herself that she wasn't sure it would work on the first try. She'd never attempted something quite like this before. And the things she'd left behind would be belief-breaking clues that someone had architected the place, that there hadn't all along just been cave fairies living in a cave system at the back of a crepe restaurant.

She went back, and she didn't meet the fairies.

They were there. But they were sleeping. She tiptoed through their village, held her breath and tried not to cry when she saw their little faces through their windows. It was perfect. The kid with the untied shoes could be the first person they'd ever met, but she got to see them.

She took her things and blew the fairy village a kiss and went out of the fantasy kingdom.

She had another twenty-two years in her. Maybe she could find another door.

Next time, she thought she'd do one with unicorns.

Planets

This story is a sequel to [Rings](#).

The bride looked exquisite, covered wrist to throat and scalp to ankle in white all aswirl with glittering beads and satin stitch. The color she'd put the bridesmaids in, robin's-egg blue, was possibly the only color of the rainbow that wouldn't flatter Shula. Celia wondered from the audience if that was why Amrika had chosen it, so as not to be outshone by her prettier sister. Shula was taking it with good enough grace, both the color and the fact that the wedding dress code, in deference to conservative ancestors, called for her to abide by modesty standards she typically held in contempt. Hidden was Shula's glorious singularity-black hair, most of her flawless dusky skin. She smiled, though, watching her unwittingly adoptive older sister mince down the aisle toward her fiancé.

Celia, from the third row on Amrika's side, looked at the smiling man in his perfectly fitted navy suit - was it technically a suit? It was an outfit on good terms with the idea of suits - and Celia wondered what he was like. Amrika joined him, and Celia wondered what *she* was like. Celia barely knew Amrika, and attended her wedding as Shula's don't-ask-don't-tell plus one, because she and Shula were themselves engaged to be married in a couple of years and presented to Shula's family as best friends. Once Celia had finished college they'd probably either stop talking to the Alis entirely or see what happened if Shula told them she was gay. Once Celia had her degree they'd have no reason to loiter on Earth.

A degree she would never use but clung to anyway. Her attendance was perfect.

Celia wondered what these people were like, how they were to each other. How they had decided to get married. How much they knew

about each other. It was probably not like how it had been for Celia, who was proposed to on her eighteenth birthday with a magic ring that turned out to grant immortality and embroil her in an alien succession intrigue at the elbow of her space-princess changeling girlfriend. Probably the Alis knew the groom's family, or they met at the mosque, or they met online, or they'd been in a class together at school, and then -

Celia wasn't sure what came after "and then". She just knew it was probably not like her own engagement.

The ceremony dragged on and significant parts of it were in Arabic. Celia people-watched, mind wandering, scalp itching under the scarf she was wearing to be polite. There were two other bridesmaids besides Shula; Celia thought one of them, mid-teens and brown and plain, might be the groom's sister, and the other she understood to be an old friend of Amrika's. The friend wasn't Yemeni, she was some sort of East Asian, and she had a moon-round face peeking out of her turquoise scarf and looked deliriously happy. Probably Amrika's friend knew the groom and had a good reason to be happy. The groomsmen she didn't know at all; Amrika didn't have a brother to supply (and Shula's brothers all lived in space and had never met Shula's adoptive family). Probably friends of the groom. They were about his age, plausibly Muslim. Well, for all Celia knew the Asian friend was Muslim too. Celia might be the only non-Muslim in the whole building.

Did Shula count? She was an atheist, in terms of what she believed about the world, but she'd been brought up culturally Muslim, but that was only after being raised for twelve years by a part-alien father and human mother of Catholic sympathies. Celia hadn't thought to wonder before just now how you could be Catholic in space. Didn't you need a priest? Periodic updates from the Vatican? Maybe they had kidnapped a priest and Celia had just never happened to hear about it.

Shula had offered to bring her for visits to the plakti world a couple of times since they'd gone for their surprise engagement party. Celia hadn't wanted to go and Shula hadn't pushed back on that. Celia let Shula visit the dark flame-lit planet under its dead star without Celia along, and Celia would take that weekend and do homework, or sleep late and watch TV and dance to music Shula didn't like, or go into town for a coffee and a cinnamon bun all by herself.

Shula went about four times a year, and she'd started visiting her home planet the summer before twelfth grade, and now they were sophomores in college. So Celia had had ten weekends to herself. Otherwise her life was: school attended around Shula, the apartment she shared with Shula, nights in or nights out with Shula, dinners and parties and sex and talking about getting a dog with Shula.

Even at moments like this one, with Shula focused on her bridesmaid responsibilities and not even looking in Celia's direction, Celia was here because of Shula, and couldn't stop thinking about Shula.

Eventually the ceremony ended. Conservative relatives meant there was no dancing. Celia understood it to be a compromise that the men and women attendees were in the same room at all (how did heterosexuals get married under those conditions?). But there was a reception after the vows were exchanged, people Celia didn't know milling around asking her how she knew the couple. "I'm Amrika's sister's friend," she said over and over to cousins and co-workers and the imam. "I'm Celia, I'm Amrika's sister's friend."

She didn't know why Shula persisted in pretending to this family that she was their mildly observant Muslim daughter who lived with a "friend". Maybe she'd actually gotten attached to them in the time she spent re-maturing in their household. Maybe there was a *rule*. Shula was pretty careful about her planet's rules for how princesses were supposed to conduct themselves on Earth.

Celia drifted through the throng. She wound up near Amrika's friend the bridesmaid. "Hi," Celia said.

"Hi! I noticed you before, it's very mono-ethnic here except me and you, isn't it?" said the bridesmaid. "Is that weird for you?"

"Not all that weird," said Celia. "I'm Celia, Shula's friend."

"I'm Jenny. It's nice to meet you."

"Yeah, you too. How do you know Amrika?"

"School! We had a whole bunch of us all really tight, since middle school, but there was some major drama, twelfth grade, it was me and Amrika versus the other three... how do you know Shula?"

"Also school. Just us, we were always - best friends."

"Best friends or *best friends*, huh?"

"- excuse me?"

"I'm Episcopalian, you can say."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Celia, skin tightening in a cold shiver all the way up her back because she didn't know *why* Shula was maintaining her cover with her Earth family but Shula was absolutely doing that and Celia *had* to back her up.

"You ping my gaydar really hard," Jenny said in a loud whisper.

"I really don't think this is the place." Was Jenny drunk? How did one get drunk at a Muslim wedding? There wasn't a drop to be had anywhere in a two block radius. Maybe she was just this kind of person. What kind of person did Amrika make friends with? Celia didn't know. She drew away from Jenny, looking for Shula. Shula wouldn't be angry with *Celia* about it if she witnessed all subsequent

Jenny-originating unreasonableness and knew Celia had tried her best.

Jenny followed her. "Hey, where are you going?"

Celia couldn't see Shula anywhere, she wasn't tall enough to pick out and the crowd was too thick to spot another robin's-egg blue outfit and take a gamble on that being Shula instead of the groom's sister. "Bathroom," she said instead.

"Oh yeah, I need to touch up my eyes, I think I was crying a little, *weddings*, am I right?"

"Yeah," said Celia noncommittally, trying to lose her in a knot of electricians who worked for the Ali family business.

Jenny was undeterred. "How'd you convince Mr. and Mrs. Ali to let you be Shula's plus one?"

"I don't know, Shula handled that, I wasn't privy to the conversation." Maybe the bathroom would be single occupancy and she could wait Jenny out inside.

No such luck. Jenny followed her into the roomful of stalls and got to work on her eye makeup. Celia didn't actually have to pee. Was Jenny paying enough attention to be listening for that? Maybe she'd figure Celia just had to change a pad or something. This would be Celia's alibi if Jenny blundered even further into inappropriate questions territory and *asked*. Celia rummaged in her purse to make appropriate background sounds and willed her to go away.

Jenny did not go away. "Amrika knows, I think," she said.

Well, that stopped Celia cold with her hand between her driver's license and her bottle of Benadryl. "Pardon?" she squeaked.

"I think Amrika knows about you and Shula! She's never *said* , but it's sort of in how she talks about you? And she could've convinced her mom and dad to let you come to the wedding, so that'd explain it, right?"

"Um," Celia tried to say, since that was noncommittal, but nothing came out. "I don't think I understand, perhaps we could talk about something else, do you like hockey," she tried to say, but it didn't happen. She settled for letting herself out of the stall, ready to try another fleeing tactic.

The door swung open and Celia saw Shula's face framed in robin's-egg blue hijab and wished the Earth would open up under her feet.

"Celia, Jenny, hi," said Shula, all smiles, a dark edge in her voice, and Celia thought about how she could change her teeth to gleaming fangs. "Celia, I'm about ready to go home."

"I, okay," said Celia, clutching her purse. "Okay. Did you already say goodbye to, uh, your family?"

"No, I'll do that on the way out. I wanted to find you first," said Shula. And she couldn't hold out her hand for Celia to take, in front of Jenny, because Jenny only *thought* she knew something, and would be much more credible if she added *I saw them holding hands* -

Celia went along as though pulled anyway, sticking as close to Shula as she could without touching her while the wedding guests flowed around them. Shula bade goodbye to a grandmother, a great-aunt, a cousin, another cousin -

Amrika and her new husband were by the exit. Amrika caught Shula in a hug. "Going home already?"

"It's a few hours in the car to get back to school!" said Shula "I don't want to be here till too late. It was a gorgeous wedding, thank you

for letting me be in it, Amrika."

"Of course, I wasn't gonna leave you out, baby sister," said Amrika. "I'd wanted longer to catch up with you - and Celia - though -"

"Well, maybe another time," Shula said.

"Celia, I don't think I have your phone number," said Amrika.

"Um - do I have a pen -" Celia rummaged in her purse, feeling Shula's presence behind her, tall and warm like a pillar of flame, watching the back of her neck. Celia found a golf pencil and a drugstore receipt (she checked the front of it, hurried; the most incriminating purchase was three bags of Hershey kisses, no lube or anything) and wrote her phone number on the back. "There - text first, I'm in class a lot -"

"Yeah, sure," said Amrika, "thanks! It was so good to see you both! Have a good drive!"

They weren't driving, of course. Shula's servants Lyne and Cait were going to assume Shula and Celia's forms and make the trip while Shula teleported them to their off-campus apartment; why drive for hours when you could have shapeshifting space aliens do it for you, still have all the stuff you kept in your car at the other end, and spend the time you saved at home with your fiancée?

Once they were out of the building Shula drew Celia behind the catering van in the parking lot. Celia closed her eyes; around her, the air pressure changed, the smells of asphalt and greenery on the wind were replaced with their apartment's hum of the air conditioning carrying scents from the fruit bowl piled high with pomegranates and peaches and a plakti fruit Celia was supposed to call "blue persimmons" to anyone who asked what they were. Shula's presence was constant through the shift, standing right by Celia's side, close and spicy-scented. She stepped in closer once they were in the privacy of their home.

"What were you doing with Jenny in the bathroom?" Shula asked in Celia's ear. Shula's fingers reached for Celia's hairline, pulled the scarf off and freed Celia's yellow hair to tumble in its braid down between her shoulderblades. There was a swushing noise that suggested Shula was taking her scarf off too.

Celia kept her eyes closed. "She followed me. I was trying to get rid of her."

"It didn't look like you tried very hard."

Deep breath. Fruit from space, fruit from Earth, gingery Shula-smell, the vanilla candle on the table, the last batch of roses Shula bought her every Sunday smelling red and cottony from the vase on the table - "I didn't want to make a scene. She was saying she knew about us, she said I pinged her gaydar."

"A girl comes up to you and says you *ping her gaydar* and *two minutes later* you and her are alone in the bathroom, Celia?"

"- I know that sounds bad, but. Nothing happened. I didn't even like her. She was obnoxious and - and intrusive and -"

"You should have come to me."

"I tried, I didn't see you."

"I saw *you*, and you're shorter than I am, so you must not have been looking very hard."

"Shula, nothing *happened* - but she thinks Amrika knows about you and me, she thinks -"

"So you're saying a girl who *knows you're taken* came up to you at a party and said you ping her gaydar - honestly, that isn't even a line, it's not even a *bad* line, and you - not two minutes later -"

"Nothing happened, I went straight into a stall, she was fixing her makeup she said, and then you came in."

"Don't interrupt me."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you didn't have time to cheat on me, but that wasn't okay. Don't let it happen again." Shula leaned away from Celia, took a half-step back to sit at the breakfast bar. She picked up a pomegranate, hefted it idly. "Did you have a nice time, other than that part with Jenny?"

"It was okay," Celia said. "Pity there wasn't any dancing."

"Well, we couldn't have danced even if there had been, not you and me. We can dance now, if you like." She set down the pomegranate and slid off the barstool. She took Celia into her arms, and Celia swayed with her, leaning her head on Shula's shoulder. That hadn't been so bad. She needed to stop panicking every time Shula was annoyed, it wasn't reasonable to expect Shula to never be annoyed with her, not when they were going to be together for hundreds of years.

They danced. Shula's laptop was open on the kitchen table; she swayed Celia over to it and touched a couple keys to put on music. It was bright, chirpy stuff that was queued up, with lyrics in Japanese and mangled English, hilariously wrong for the pace of dance they were doing; Celia laughed first, then Shula, and they giggled through the first verse and a half of the song with their faces buried in each other's necks till Shula pulled Celia along into a spinning fast improvisation of steps. "I forgot I had this on yesterday," Shula said, "I picked it while I was cooking the chicken last night, I think you were out getting cream?"

"Mushrooms, we had cream but we forgot mushrooms," Celia said.

"Right, mushrooms. That was a good recipe."

"Is there any left?"

"Nah, I let Lyne have it." Lyne and Cait shared an apartment in the same building and Celia had never been in there, though Shula was frequently in and out talking to them about this and that. Perhaps they didn't cook. They could teleport back to the plakti world for food if necessary. Was it a status symbol to eat food your princess cooked?

Celia didn't ask. "Oh well, we can make it again."

"Any time you like, my love." Shula kissed Celia's neck as she dipped her with the last note of the song. Celia shivered. Shula did it again, maybe holding her up off the floor at this angle so easily with shapeshifting affecting her muscles, Celia wasn't sure how - there were teeth now, mm -

"I've been thinking," Shula said, "apropos of Amrika's wedding, what with *our* wedding being on the horizon, that we maybe need condoms."

"...Condoms?" said Celia, trying to figure out what Shula had actually said instead.

"Well, you don't want to get pregnant *now*, do you? And it seems like a bad idea all around to approach the attempt cold, as it were, in a couple years."

Celia was empty of responses. She hung where Shula held her, staring up into her fiancée's face blankly.

"I guess you could just go on birth control but I don't know about all that fucking with your hormones," Shula amended.

"I don't know that I - I mean, it's years off, our wedding -"

"Honestly, Celia, be practical, I've never used the parts before. I might shapeshift them wrong the first forty times and that leaves aside how effectively I'll be able to use them. You're looking at a hell of a honeymoon if we don't get some dry runs out of the way now, it's *really important* to have an heir on the way pretty quick after. My parents waited but no one was concerned they might not be *able to* . Once a month will probably do the trick."

"Um, you could, practice by yourself, and we could get a turkey baster when the time comes -"

"Celia."

"- yeah?"

"I am engaged to the beautiful love of my life. We have this whole apartment to ourselves. I am not going to sort through the Internet's pathetic selection of lesbian porn without any naked men participating so that I can then grow a dick and masturbate in the bathroom alone like a teenage boy. I'm not expecting it to be a particularly enjoyable experience or I would have tried it when I was thirteen. I need you there to help me out."

"Oh."

"Besides, the success rates for turkey basters aren't great, I hear." Shula kissed her neck again, and finally pulled her out of the dip onto her feet. "Doesn't sound like you want to wait and go to a Planned Parenthood for something more elaborate so condoms it is. It's my turn to go to the store since you got the mushrooms, I'll just get out of this silly dress and into street clothes and then I'll be back in fifteen minutes. Don't you change, I want to take you out of your dress myself."

"Okay," Celia said, and Shula kissed her on the mouth and spun away into their room to get out of the bridesmaid dress and come out in black jeans and a clingy red top, scoop-necked and short-

sleeved. Much more flattering. The jeans did not have room for anything Shula didn't usually have, so that was presumably waiting till she came home again and took them off.

Celia, in the long blue sundress she'd made modest enough for the event with the addition of a sweater, sat by the fruit bowl staring at the blue persimmons from space. She waited.

Celia sporadically attended the campus LGBT club, and had since the start of sophomore year, largely based on whether they were ordering good takeout that week. This week was from the better Chinese place in rotation, so Celia put in an order to the group's email list for pork fried rice and fish with black bean sauce and showed up a few minutes late.

The nicest person in the club was Terrence, a gay guy a year ahead of Celia who'd introduced her to the club after meeting her in orchestra. He had his flute with him, under his chair, and he waved at her when she came in. "Hey there! We were just talking about you."

"I'm sorry I'm late."

"No big deal, we weren't talking about how late you are. How come Shula never comes to these things?"

"She's not much of a joiner," Celia said. "She's got her own stuff going on." She was in space. Celia didn't expect to ever have an opportunity or a good enough reason to try to tell anybody about the alien space princess thing - except her dad, who already knew. But just in case, she didn't tell anyone about the family history of psychosis either, unless they already knew about *that*. Like her mom, who knew before Shula's servants wiped her memory, or Uncle Joe, who'd avoided that fate but was well used to dealing with his brother David's delusions.

Some of which were actually magical divinatory knowledge, but that she couldn't exactly hope to explain unless someone had already bought the entire rest of the story. Or had their own magic. Earth magic, not alien magic - Celia didn't know what kinds Earth would have besides her dad's -

"Celia?" said Terrence.

"Hm?"

"You spaced out there for a bit, I was trying to catch you up on what the conversation was - Bailey was saying she considers you and Shula a model for lesbian relationships in general, like you're her favorite couple -"

"Yeah," put in Bailey, the group organizer, a lesbian of the slight and butch sort who was frequently taken to be a teenage boy from a distance. "You spend a lot of time together and it's so sweet, I have seen the way she looks at you and I *know* you're not suffering lesbian bed death, the story of how she proposed was adorable, I don't know why there aren't more chicks like you two out there." Bailey scratched her buzzcutted head, took off her glasses to wipe them on her shirt. "I can't find a girl who's - oh," she interrupted herself at a knock on the door, "food's here." She went to collect it and came back with a boxful of cardboard foldup containers. "They forgot to write our names on them *again*, fend for yourselves, I don't remember what you all got."

"Touch my scallion pancake and die," said Sondra, pouncing on the food. Celia had to look to see if it was her or one of the boys speaking, since her voice was pretty deep, though she really should have guessed because the boys in the club were respectively gluten-intolerant, completely predictable in only ever ordering chow mein, and unlikely to issue facetious death threats.

Terrence found Celia's rice for her; the fish took longer to turn up, being easily mistaken under its sauce for someone else's chicken.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked her when he rescued the fish from Bailey.

"I didn't sleep very well last night," Celia said, which was true. It was hard to sleep right next to Shula after - practicing. She'd stared at the lights that showed faded through the curtains, awake, for what had felt like hours. She kept getting up to go to the bathroom, and kept finding herself awake even as dream-fragments added themselves in small batches to her memory. She'd dreamed about fish eggs and about black palaces in darkness and about fire and about sweet Shula in high school, back before Celia had known anything, before her mom had been kidnapped. Some other Celia in another universe could be living in Montana, resentful and wistful about her gorgeous perfect high school sweetheart taken from her by interstate distances. That Celia would have slept fine last night, most likely.

Celia had dreamed about the time she kind of tried to murder her fiancée, and in the dream she'd actually done it, and Shula had shriveled up then and there, screaming, and Celia had woken up for the fourth time, cold and stiff.

"I know where you can bum some sleeping pills off a guy," Terrence said. "Let me know if you keep having that problem, sleep is super important and exams are coming up."

"Month and a half isn't 'coming up'," said Sondra, from Terrence's other side. "Lighten up."

"Well, sleep is important anyway," said Terrence. "I never stay at a guy's place overnight, because I can't sleep in the same bed as another person even if they don't snore - did you notice any change when you started sharing a bed with Shula?"

Celia had first shared a bed - well, a bedlike floor surface - with Shula the night of their engagement party on the plakti world, and what she remembered of the night was mostly being held and

petted in that way that blurred the line between cuddling and having sex, and falling asleep, and sneaking out to visit her dad to get divinatory proclamations from him.

Celia should call her dad soon. Maybe she'd leave the club early, sit by the pond, watch ducks, get him on the phone and see if he had anything to tell her. If he magically knew about last night's practice then she wouldn't need to tell him, and if he didn't then he could go on not knowing.

"I guess I wake up at night more," Celia said, "when she's there."

"You should look into getting separate beds," Terrence advised.

"Nooooo," put in Bailey with comically exaggerated horror from across the table. "They're perfect and need to fall asleep holding hands. Like beautiful lesbian otters floating in the sea making sure not to lose each other."

Terrence rolled his eyes. Bailey huffed at him and turned on the movie of the week; she had a prodigious queer film collection and dipped into it whenever they didn't have a project or a topic, which was most of the time.

The movie was long and boring and arty and in French. Celia whispered an excuse in Terrence's ear for him to pass on if Bailey complained. Then she took her leftovers, half the fish poured on top of half the rice to pull out for lunch tomorrow, and went out to the bench by the duck pond. There weren't any ducks out; the sun had set and they were presumably all sleeping. Celia put her food down next to her, pulled out her phone, sat there still for a few minutes, spacing out -

Her phone rang. *David Lister*, it said, that was her dad. He knew she'd been going to call. Sometimes she wavered, on whether she thought he really had a branch of Earth magic or just oddly compelling delusions, but moments like this tipped the balance. She

jolted briefly at the noise in the dark and quiet, and then tapped the answer button and said, "Hi Dad."

"Hi, Celia. What's going on?"

"Just skipped out on a club meeting." Pause. "Went to Amrika's wedding yesterday."

If he'd forgotten who Amrika was - if indeed he'd never learned the name - either he deemed it unimportant or his magic filled him in with the necessary context. "That sounds nice. Did you have a good time?"

"There wasn't any dancing since they're too Muslim. She wanted my number, to catch up later since we didn't get to talk."

"She'll text you next week." Celia could have guessed the time frame, since Amrika was going on a honeymoon to Bolivia for nine days, though she wouldn't have been sure about receiving a text at all.

"Thanks. How's Uncle Joe?" asked Celia.

"He's working long hours. Saving up for the new Nintendo thing, I don't remember what's it's called," said David.

"You're doing okay without him checking in as much?"

"Yeah. On my meds and eating and everything," David said.

"Should I let you go? You sound tired." He always sounded tired, but there was always-tired and really-tired, and this was borderline.

"You can trust Rai," David said.

"Who?"

"Rai."

"Who's Rye?"

"She's a princess. Like Shula," said David.

"...Okay. I'll trust Rai, if it comes up," Celia said.

"You don't have to. But you can," clarified David.

"Okay. Thanks, Dad."

"Any time. I think that's all I have."

"It's okay. I know it's hard."

"I wish I could tell you more."

"You can call me sometimes even if you don't know anything you have to tell me," Celia offered. Her dad was the only person she could talk to who knew everything and wasn't Shula or Shula's servant or Shula's biological relatives. Celia's mom Maureen remembered nothing of significance; as far as she was concerned she'd moved a couple years ago to Montana for her new job, gotten deliriously ill, and recovered, all while Celia and Shula were adorably normal humans together and Celia lived on David's couch first, then obligatory freshman housing, then the apartment with Shula.

"I might do that," he said. "If you'll answer. I think I usually can know if you'll answer the phone. And if it's going to rain, I know that too."

"That's good, isn't it? If there's things you can consistently know?"

"I guess. I don't feel like it's a skill I'm getting better at, it just happens, enough that I expect it."

"Either way. Maybe there's more things like that you'll find."

"Should I keep taking my meds, Celia? Do you think I should?" David asked after a pause. He sounded wistful.

Celia blinked. "Uh. Yes. You should take them every day just like your doctor says."

"What if they're messing with the magic?"

"- I mean, they could be, but if you start mixing in delusions with stuff you actually know, nobody's going to be able to use any of it, even you," Celia said. "If you suddenly thought you knew three times as much stuff and half of it was just nonsense, I wouldn't be able to sort out which of it was real unless I already knew the answer, right? And you'd do weird things, and Uncle Joe would have to stop you, or put you in the hospital..."

"Yeah," he said heavily. "You're right. It's just... so..."

"Yeah." Celia sighed heavily. If there were some purer, stronger form of David's divination that would be accessible if not for antipsychotics it would be so tantalizingly useful. But that might not even be the case; they had no other people with the same power to compare against. If anyone else had manifested fledgeling Earth magic, as opposed to the kind Shula's home planet was old enough to universally bestow on its natives, then David's power had declined to notify him.

"Sorry, Celia."

"It's not your fault." She paused. "Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think you'd know if - if I were going to - I'm almost the age you were, when -" He'd been in college. He'd dropped out, and Celia didn't know the details of what he'd claimed to see or what voices he'd heard except for the story about beating a sofa with a broom,

but he never went back to school after that. Celia was pretty damn sure she'd been an accident. Her hyphenated surname was her mother being magnanimous, as was her growing up knowing her father; no one had been likely to offer custody of an infant to a man in a psychiatric hospital.

"I don't think I'd know," he said, voice heavy. "I might notice once it happened. I don't think I could see it coming."

"Okay." An automatic response. It wasn't really.

"If I notice it I can try to tell your mom and your uncle."

"Shula can just delete it if they make trouble." Celia shivered. "I guess I don't know if she'd still want me if I had a psychotic break. Maybe she wouldn't. I don't know what the rules are if your consort goes nuts, maybe she'd get to pick again or she'd have to let a sibling have a turn..."

"I don't know," murmured David.

"It's okay, Dad." They both fell silent. Celia watched the moonlight quivering on the surface of the pond. "I should get home."

"Okay. Bye. I love you," he said.

She hung up. She watched the water for a moment longer, then trudged to the car. She couldn't teleport, so when she went places alone, she used the car, and so far had not tried cheekily suggesting that a servant teleport to pick her up and another wear her face to drive the car around in case she needed something out of the glove compartment. She just sat in the driver's seat and turned it on and went to her apartment where Shula was waiting.

Shula was on the couch with a bowl of ice cream, watching something in Arabic that could have been a documentary or a sitcom

for all Celia knew. "Welcome home!" Shula chirped. "Look on your pillow, I got you something."

Celia blinked and went to the bedroom. On her pillow was a little ring box; she opened it, and it was one of the thin gold bands with rubies in it that plakti magic could store things in. Shula could tell hers apart somehow; Celia only had two, one for Spanish and one for immortality, but both of them looked exactly like this one. She brought the box out into the living room. "What does it do?" she asked.

"Put it on!"

Celia smiled a little, and put it on her empty right index finger. The Arabic emanating from the TV snapped into sense. Someone was talking about buying shoes; she didn't have context, just the language. "Arabic!" she grinned.

"Yup! C'mere. I'll back up the movie for you."

Celia sat next to her and tucked herself under Shula's arm comfortably. Shula took her hand and inspected it, compared to the other - "I'll have to get you a fourth ring, so you can be symmetrical."

"What kind?"

"That's a surprise," said Shula. "You'll see when I get it for you." She kissed Celia on the head and backed up the movie fifteen minutes. "I wasn't sure you were going to be home before I'd seen the whole thing, you're usually back earlier from gay club."

"The gay movie was long today. I didn't even stay for the whole thing."

"How's Bailey?"

"...She's fine? Have you even met her?"

"You've mentioned her."

"She's fine. So's Terrence, so's Sondra, so's the guy whose name I can't remember and the guy whose name I can't pronounce, so's -"

"I didn't ask about them."

"I'm not going to cheat on you, Shula."

"That's good." Shula kissed her head again.

"Bailey's too butch for me anyway. Looks like she's in a boy band and I can tell when she hits thirty she'll look like somebody's weird uncle. And she ships us really hard, so even if I went nuttier than Dad and decided to try it..." She tried to sound light, joking. Better for it all to be a silly idea, easily dismissed.

"All right." Shula rearranged the snuggle a little bit for better long-term sustainability, squeezed her, and returned her attention to the movie. It looked like a romantic comedy, although Celia wasn't sure she was parsing it right. The ring gave her the language, but not the cultural background to interpret all the tropes. She murmured questions where she had a clear enough confusion to formulate them and Shula answered low and soft. There were abundant complications, and eventually the boy and the girl wound up getting married, and Shula clinked her rings against the one on Celia's left ring finger that served as an engagement ring.

They went to bed after the movie and Celia draped herself over Shula's body, soaking up warmth. Shula was soft. They snuggled in the dark, just the streetlights and car headlights admitted by the curtains serving to give large objects borders against dissimilar backgrounds. Celia could just see Shula's hair against the white pillowcases, Shula's champagne colored nightdress against their blue bedspread, Shula's eyes in her face.

Shula kissed her, then kissed her again, and rolled them over to repeat herself from a new vantage point - then sat up and scooted over to reach into her nightstand drawer for candles. She pulled out three tealights, scattered them on top of the nightstand, and lit them with magic, each flaring to six-inch bright flames before calming to a more natural flicker apiece. Celia squinted, then blinked away the spots in her vision in time to see Shula in firelit color leaning over her again. Shula had such *cheekbones* and such *hair* and such *eyelashes* . Such a smile. Celia reached up to touch her face.

When the tealights burned themselves out, they left sleeping girls embracing in the dark.

Celia had classes the next day. Introduction to Genetics where she sat next to Sondra at nine in the morning, and Ecology with nobody she knew at eleven, and a quick lunch from the campus bistro which she usually took in company with Terrence before she went to lab hours, stats, and her literature seminar discussion. When she got home for dinner, Shula hadn't cooked anything. Celia was about to suggest that they order pizza when Shula said, "Visiting my folks tonight."

"- which folks?"

"Going to my planet," Shula clarified. "I think you should come. You're going to live there, you know, you should know the place, get comfortable with it. Learn to tell apart all your in-laws-to-be, I know for a fact you don't even remember most of their names."

"I remember Meer's name. - And Rai." That was who Rai was, she was suddenly ninety percent sure.

"Rai will be flattered, but only if you tell her that, Celia, you've been snubbing them all for literal years now. They think you don't like them. It makes my mother sad."

"I'm sorry."

"Come with me tonight. I'm not staying very long, it'll be dinner and sitting around in the parlor with my parents and brothers and sisters. Except Meer, obviously. It'll be fine. Very tame. They'll call me 'Kess' and I'll correct them, and maybe they'll try to get you to play Flame Squares, which is a board game you physically cannot play but I can make your moves for you, and when we're tired we'll come back here for the night. Piece of cake. We can work up to going with them on weeklong camping trips."

"I'm trying to imagine camping on that planet, and..."

"Oh, you've only seen inside the palace. There's life on the planet, it's just that there's no sun so it all has to run on magically generated energy. It catches fire a lot. I mean the life does. We won't go out among it without appropriate preparations, fire extinguishers and asbestos socks and the works, I promise. Talk to Rai about biology all evening if you like."

"She does biology?" Celia asked.

"Mm-hm. You can tell her about Earth stuff and she can tell you about other stuff. You'll have a fine time. Come on, Celia, I don't avoid *your* family."

"I don't avoid your family, I went with you to Amrika's wedding."

"My biological family. If *you* had two families I wouldn't avoid either of them. Come with me." She held out her hand.

"...Dinner and I talk to Rai about biology the entire rest of the time?"

"And make a good faith effort learn the others' names, but yes."

"Deal," said Celia, and she held Shula's hand. The world changed around them, and they were surrounded by black stone and hot

mineral-scented air.

Shula lit the wall sconces as they went. Celia had never closely inspected one; maybe they had fuel in them to keep hold of the fire independently of someone doing magic, the way Shula used tealights, or maybe whoever wanted the room to be light had to pay some attention to that all the time. It seemed like a harmless question: "Do you have to actively keep those lit or do they do it themselves?"

"There's oil running into them, and wicks that the servants replace now and then, sort of like the kind of lamp you can get genies out of," Shula said. "You can do it the other way but it'd be distracting and you'd keep winding up in the dark if you forgot about it."

"Makes sense." She followed Shula through the corridors and down the stairs, looking for her family. This wasn't Shula's estate, though the architecture was a lot alike; Celia noticed the difference when she saw the view out of one of the scarce windows. There were gardens, sort of, outside, growing under a combination of glass-bottomed paths of fire arcing over them and more conventional electric lamps. "There are lamps."

"Plants like white light," said Shula, "or something like that. Rai ran out of room to garden in her estate - they weren't built with gardening in mind, not a lot of grounds outside the buildings, we can *handle* if it local wildlife catches fire but that doesn't make it comfortable if it surprises us. But she gardens, so she expanded here, I'm told, while I was growing up over again."

"And the plants don't set each other on fire?" Celia asked, imagining ferns in incendiary combat, plants evolving to be toxic when burned to poison anything that toasted them -

"She has a sprinkler system, and the ones that are more likely to do that are planted off by themselves without close neighbors, I think? Ask her." And Shula pushed open a set of doors into a parlor, if you

wanted to call a giant hall with a maze of seating options arrayed across its floor a "parlor". Through this room and taking a right turn they found the dining room. "Hello everyone!" Shula said, switching to the Spanish of her first childhood. Celia already had a ring for it. She processed without consciously trying the centuries-old dialect Shula's biological parents had spoken when they'd met back on Earth, evolved a little since then with the contributions of plakti learners and dozens of accumulated personal idioms isolated on this world. The ring didn't do all that much for modern Spanish, but it made it easier to learn, so Celia was taking it for her language requirement for the degree she'd never use because she was going to get married and be queen consort of this planet.

"Welcome home, Kess!" called Shula's father, King Juan Luis. Why he was calling Shula by the name she'd grown up with instead of the one she'd gotten accustomed to on Earth, and preferred, while he went by his Spanish name from his days as a South American conquistador's cuckoo, Celia did not know.

"It's Shula," said Shula. "Let's see... Tam, Pax, Dah, Rai... where are Zi and Nik?" The table was set for dinner, the empty chairs apparently for Celia and Shula themselves based on Shula pulling Celia into one and taking the other. Zi and Nik, whichever siblings those were, were apparently not only late but not expected to show up at all. Celia let a servant lean past her to ladle something mashed and something roasted and something glazed onto her plate. She thought she could identify oats and the smell of apricots, that was all.

"Zi is at the weeklong shape dance - he's in fourth place, last I heard, you should remember to congratulate when he comes back, especially if he pulls ahead - and Nik is spending some time with your grandmother since he and Pax have been fighting," replied the king.

Celia tried to keep the names straight. They were all so short. Why hadn't they named their kids Spanish things like Gabriela and Pablo? Was it necessary to honor plakti naming customs in the course of gradually replacing their population with reproductively capable part-plakti? She was going to mix them up. She was going to be calling them Tax and Pam by the end of the night.

Pax (it was Pax, *Pax*, wasn't that Latin for peace? a mnemonic of sorts) seemed to be the tall, long-faced girl lounging on a low-backed chair; she said, "Which is Mama's way of saying he's a terrible little sneak."

"I don't think he was setting out to upset you, darling," said Queen Elena.

"He read my diary," Pax explained to Shula. "And brought it up over breakfast with the whole family, the next day."

"He was *trying* to figure out whether you had a secret boyfriend you're not supposed to have," said another sibling, maybe Dah.

"I'm straight, though," said, apparently, Tam, "and I look good, I'd do fine, doesn't matter what Pax does."

Maybe-Dah said, "Pax still shouldn't have a boyfriend. It's irresponsible."

"I don't have a boyfriend!" cried Pax.

"That's not what Nik said!" hooted the brother Celia was tentatively designating Dah.

"He misinterpreted some things he shouldn't even have been reading -" Pax said defensively, but she was interrupted:

"He had enough to go on before that, he didn't want to embarrass you without knowing for sure -" Dah countered.

"Not in front of the *guest*," said a sister. Rai, Celia guessed. She was small - they'd all be adults, now, so that wasn't an age indicator, but it was her most distinguishing feature in the family. They were all chai-brown, all had black hair and dark eyes, all beautiful and gracile, their mother the least pretty with a purely human background and age starting to catch up with her despite the ring she shared with her husband. "You're making us look bad," Rai continued.

"Celia's not a guest, she'll be family soon enough," said Tam.

"She's a guest now," objected Rai.

She was seated across from Celia, which made it relatively easy to lean over to say, "Hello, it's nice to properly meet you - I barely spoke to you at the party and you never come out here -"

"I've been busy," said Celia weakly. She pushed around the something-mashed on her plate; she'd liked the other two things all right but whatever this was either tasted bad on its own merits or was simply never meant for mashing.

"Oh, I understand, it's just nice that you're here now."

"...Shula says you do biology. And, uh, gardening, and that the plants catch fire," Celia said.

"Oh, yes. The native plants here are hard to cultivate, you get a lot of burns that way if you don't know what you're doing. I wear gloves, but I've lost my eyebrows a couple of times," said Rai, as Pax and Dah continued bickering in the background and Shula made some sort of family in-joke commentary toward her mother. "And I can't wear anything I like in the garden here. I have another less flammable one on a colony planet."

"Colony planet?" asked Celia. Shula was being drawn into a conversation with Dah about an uncle of theirs, and his hang-gliding

accident.

"Has Shula not told you about the colony planets?" asked Rai. "I guess she might have never been to one, so they might not have seemed important... We have some. Earth plants can't grow here without a lot of light it's hard to set up to get them, especially for big things like trees, but they're very popular. You can put a scallion under a lamp but it's not worth the trouble for almonds. And there are a lot of animals that don't like the lack of sun too. So we farm a lot of food on another planet, and some people live there. I have gardens here from when I was little, but most of my work is under a sun. It's so bright." She wrinkled her nose. "I wind up working at night. The plants can do without me for the daytime. And I have helpers for the animals."

"The plakti don't mind the sun?"

"They can shapeshift. I mean, I can too, but I'm scared about not being able to have kids, and changing my eyes *shouldn't* do that, but what if it did?"

"You're one of the younger ones, though," Celia could not for the life of her remember birth order except that apparently Tam was after the disgraced Meer and therefore after Shula, and Pax after Tam. "So you don't have to."

"Oh, I know, but I might want to," Rai said. "Some of the plakti are so sad that they can't, because they turned into things and forgot how to put themselves back how they were. I don't want that to happen to me. And I know there are pretty big tolerances, but I'm nervous around it. All I ever do is change my hair." Her hair was black now, matching everyone else's - Celia squinted at it - "It's normal now, but sometimes I'll do a color or make it stand up or something. It was pink last week."

"Oh," said Celia.

"Your hair is pretty," Rai told her earnestly.

"Thank you."

"I don't think there's anyone in the whole family with natural blonde hair. All black and brown and I guess I don't know whether Grandfather's hair was naturally red or not."

"Can't ask?"

"I could ask Father but he probably won't know if it was natural or if he just shifted it that way all the time. Grandfather's dead of course, or he'd be on the throne still. Anyway it didn't pass on... I'm probably boring you."

"Not at all," said Celia, distantly polite, imagining some black-haired grandchild of her own sitting at Rai's knee asking about Grandma Celia. She ate another mouthful of the roasted thing with the oats on it. It was a bizarre combination, whatever it was with whatever was in the sauce with the incongruous oats.

And Rai would say, "she was distant and unfriendly but yes, natural blonde hair, and if you abduct the right human your babies might have blonde hair too" -

"I'm curious about your gardens," Celia said abruptly, "can I see them?"

"Oh!" said Rai. "Sure - Mother, Father, can we be excused, Celia wants to see the gardens -"

Celia's instinct would have been to ask Shula, but of course Rai wouldn't do that. Their majesties gave their leave. Rai showed Celia out of the room and to a side entrance, with a switchback staircase clinging to the wall of the palace, down three flights till they let out onto the level ground among the planters and the lighting setup.

"Where does the electricity come from?" asked Celia.

"...Just because the planet doesn't look like Earth doesn't mean we don't have electricity. We don't use it for indoor lighting because most everyone can do fire, and Mother can ask servants," said Rai. "We use it for other things. There's a garbage incinerator somewhere, and the garbage is burned for electricity."

"Sorry," said Celia.

"You don't talk about our planet with Shula much, I guess?"

"Not really." Celia generally preferred to pretend to be an ordinary college student who in no way was in line for any thrones nor had access to any other celestial bodies.

"Anyway," said Rai, "here are some native plants - give them a bit of a berth so I'll have the reaction time if they flare up, but I don't think any of them are going to. It's not just people who can use magic, once a planet has it good and proper, see? And this planet has no sun, so all the life on it had to learn to generate energy with magic, and the way that works with most of our plants is that if one of them is feeling a little sickly, it'll catch. Then all its relatives nearby will be able to use the fire themselves, and it saves them from infection, and its genes do better. If they do this too easily, then they just all burn up, and if they don't do it enough, they all starve trying to hold off till another plant does it. And they have adaptations to draw the fire close to themselves but not catch from it, once another plant has sacrificed itself, so they can use it efficiently -" She tipped up a leaf shaped like an upended bowl. It was black, underneath. "This one can suck fire under its leaves and hold it there to catch the light and the warmth. It's called a catcherplant, there are lots of kinds of catcherplants. And since I want all my plants to survive, I feed them." She picked up what must be some kind of specialized gardening torch and held it under the leaf and ignited it.

"This all evolved naturally?" Celia boggled.

"Yes - it was a big disaster when the planet got magic, because things started using it and a lot of stuff burned and obviously there was the fertility crisis with the plakti shapeshifting too much, but things survived and adapted around it - like how Earth has those forests where they only grow new trees after a wildfire opens them up, only much, much more."

"Can plants shapeshift?"

"Some do. Other things than people *can* use magic, but they aren't smart about it, and you need to be a little smart to shapeshift into something other than mush. That's how our carnivorous plants work, though. They don't know how to move, they know how to seal up around things that they might eat. I have some over here!" She led Celia to a different plant, where black lumps of plant matter grew up out of the soil. "They're not that interesting looking when they haven't just been fed, but this one I can push a few days off schedule to show you -" There were bugs in a bin, and tweezers, in a compartment under the waist-level planter holding the plants. Rai tweezed one out. Celia didn't get a good look at it - the planters with Earth plants, or yet-more-alien plants that liked light, were lamplit, and there was the fire, but the overall effect of the black foliage and black sky was one of dimness and she found it hard to see how many legs the bug had, how many wings. Just an impression of something brown and squirming that Rai placed on the surface of the lump of plant.

The lump of plant - lunged, if that was what you wanted to call it, suddenly distending around the bug before it could jump or fly away.

"Wow," said Celia.

"Aren't they so cool? None of my family are really interested in this stuff. And there's the ones that -"

"Are there plants that teleport?"

"No - I mean, I guess it could happen, but if it did it'd probably die, even the sort of plant that doesn't need to be rooted to live does need specific conditions and it would be easy to wind up in space, or the ocean."

"You have an ocean?"

"Of course we have oceans."

"...Sorry."

"You should really see more of the place. You're going to be Queen. Our people will think you don't like them. You could appear at events, wave and smile..."

"I'm sorry." How many plakti were there? How many people was Celia managing to fail?

"And before you ask, there definitely aren't plants that make rings. That requires specific materials - it doesn't actually have to be rings, that's just traditional, but it does need to be gold and ruby. Other colors of corundum work but not as well, they lose fidelity on the things they're storing over time. And plants are not known for their ability to forge jewelry." Rai smiled. "It's okay. There's a lot to learn and you must have been pretty shocked, and I hear you're busy with school, too."

Celia nodded gratefully.

"You're learning now, that's what matters."

"Are there plants that erase memories?"

"That's another thing you have to be smart to do."

"That's good."

"Oh, I agree, that would be scary. There are animals that can take a minute or two, but not more than that, and I don't have any."

Celia nodded. "They seem like they'd be hard to keep."

"Oh, it can be done, you just need to be kind of obsessive about checklists or constantly on the defensive. And they're funny to watch if you keep them together because they'll do it to each other, to defuse conflicts. They'll just suddenly get confused and wander off, whichever one is slower on the draw than the other."

"It must have been - the biggest extinction ever, when magic happened here -"

"Oh, no," said Rai. "It was big, sure, but the biggest was after that. Things mostly recovered from the magic coming in, and then, after that, the sun collapsed."

"Oh." Celia briefly entertained the thought of the Earth's sun collapsing. She stopped doing that after a second.

"Yeah, that was much worse. It was good that magic happened first or nothing would have survived. As it was we avoided all starving - some plakti starved, just not all of them - long enough using free energy from magic to figure out how to get to other planets. I'm not sure how long the biomass would have lasted otherwise, fire magic still needs something to burn to work. Getting away from my field now though."

"That makes sense to me at least - so you have a farm planet and import food -"

"Right, and humans are fashionable - if you can call it that when it's been so long - so human food is too."

"What do plakti... look like?"

"What do you mean? You've seen some, our servants are all full plakti..."

"I mean if they aren't shapeshifted. Are there - fossils, of plakti from before magic happened - does anyone remember -"

"Nobody remembers - lots of people are that old, they just lost their memories at one time or another. There've been wars with memory erasure, sooner or later most people get wiped... There are fossils, though. They're in museums, you could go, or - you could get someone who's less shy about shapeshifting to show you. One of the servants, I can call Vihn over -"

"No -"

"Hm?"

"No, don't call anyone over. It's not important. Maybe I'll go to a museum with Shula sometime." Something had occurred to Celia.

Her magically informed father had told her that she could trust Rai. He was magically informed because Earth was on the verge of getting magic. Rai had just told her that it was an ecological catastrophe when a planet got magic, because not only did people suddenly have a slew of new powers, plants and animals could use those powers too.

Divination might not be very risky in the arsenal of a tree or a cabbage, not more than annoying if it happened to raccoons or roaches, not dangerous on a *global* scale if it happened to bears or bobcats, but the plakti had *five kinds* of magic. And Celia's dad had only one, but how long would that last? It wasn't happening all at once, or in any straightforwardly hereditary fashion or Celia would have something too. It could crop up at any place, at any time, for all she knew.

What sorts of things could magic even be? Plakti didn't have divination. Earth would have other, new, maybe dangerous things.

"Rai?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I tell you something and - you can't tell anyone unless I agree it's okay to tell them? It's important."

"- yes, okay -"

"Earth is getting magic," blurted Celia. "And I - I haven't told Shula, because how I know is my dad, and I'm scared she'd take my memory and do something to him and then nobody would believe him, because he's got mental health stuff on top of the actual magic, and she might, she kidnapped my mom because my mom was going to move me to Montana and away from Shula, and she replaced her with one of the plakti servants, and my dad told me, and - and if there's more kinds, if it's going to happen more and more, then -"

Rai's eyes were wide. "That could be really bad," she whispered gravely.

"Yeah. And I don't know what to do."

"What is - what can your dad do, is it a sensing power or something -"

"He just knows stuff. He doesn't have a way to steer it to things he wants to know, it just happens to him, he knows stuff, and tells me about it. He - he told me -" Celia swallowed. "He told me I could trust you. I don't know."

"Shula wasn't supposed to take your mom - well, I don't actually know, I guess a strict reading of the rules -"

"The rules allow that?"

"I *guess* . She needed *your* consent to marry her free and clear, but manipulating people around you so there aren't obstacles to that isn't... obviously against the... the real issue here is Earth magic. That's a much bigger deal although I'm very sorry about your mom. Does your dad know what other kinds there are? Here, walk around with me so it looks like I'm showing you plants -" Celia followed Rai to another planter full of dark-needled shrubs bearing white fruit. "Does he know who else might have powers, or where else they might be found? It matters enormously what they are."

"Has this happened to more planets? That you've found?"

"We found one that was all in ruins," said Rai. "There were people on it, before, and they had writing and we've figured out bits and pieces, and we know what some of their magic was, but they all died of it."

"Fuck," Celia mouthed, though she didn't quite utter the word.

"It might be that the best thing to do is evacuate the planet, have people grow up there only in sealed bunkers so they can develop its powers and learn about them that way, until the ecology outside has settled down. It depends on what it *is* , because a sealed bunker wouldn't help that much if you get teleportation like us. And have more animals experimenting with it because you skip fire magic and fewer things burn to extinction. Fire magic was bad but survivable for the whole ecosystem; the dead planet we found had something with *fusion reactions* ... the place isn't still hot, but the craters..."

"Is it always five kinds?"

"Don't have the sample size to know. We're only sure of four on the dead planet but we can't read everything and it's amazing they had time to get anything down, we can't expect it to be complete even insofar as it's legible." Rai showed her long-stalked root vegetables

that smelled like vinegar and earth. Maybe these were the mashed thing.

"Dad doesn't know about the other kinds but I can ask him again. I don't know if he's got the - full mature form of the magic. It could be his illness interfering, it could be because it's *new* - you don't know about whether it comes in full strength, do you?"

"Don't know. Might vary between magic types, especially the ones you need to be smart to use. I don't know how long it takes to get fully rooted, either. It might be that it's hundreds of years, but it might also be that Earth's been incubating it for hundreds of years, and it might also be that it's only a decade. How long has he had this?"

"- I don't know. The first confirmed stuff was around my, uh, my and Shula's engagement party, but there could have been true things mixed in with delusions and nobody would have picked them out."

"You're sure they're sometimes delusions."

"...Well, anything's possible, but I do think so, the things are - different. They make him react differently."

"Drat. Okay, so - do ask him, if he knows where to find more magic. Maybe having more starting information can help him somehow, you can tell him everything I've told you," said Rai.

They moved on to ice-blue flowers on a vine with navy blue leaflets furring its length. They were lovely; Celia almost touched one before drawing her hand back in case that would inspire a small conflagration. "Thank you," Celia said.

"Of course," Rai said. "I'm trying to think if there's anything else I can tell you. I don't think I know anything more that's useful till you've consulted your dad. - I understand why you don't want to tell Shula, but is it okay if I sound out the rest of my family?"

"I don't know them," Celia said.

"I do," replied Rai.

"...My dad said I could trust you."

"But he didn't say anything about the rest of them?"

"Yeah. I don't know. I don't know if I'm supposed to let only you know the things, or if I'm supposed to trust you to decide who to tell."

"I don't know either. Do you like the flowers?" Rai asked abruptly.

"Huh?"

"A souvenir. I have to prune them a lot. I can tie a bit of vine into a garland for you."

"- I like them."

Rai pinched off a length of vine, and stifled the gasp of fire that attempted to ignite at the damaged end, and knotted the tips and placed it on Celia's head. "Lovely," she said. "I'm so sorry about your mom. I don't know what to think about that. Shula'd been gone for eighteen years by then, and I was only six when she left. I'd like to say there must have been a mistake, but -" She shook her head, took long steps toward a pool of floating algae that burned with slow pilot lights in a dance of gently floating flame. "But in spite of being sisters I don't know her, not well enough to say that."

"Thank you," Celia said, touching a flower above her ear tentatively. "For - believing me. Um. I sort of - there's -"

Rai watched the lights float in the water. They smelled like nutmeg and salt. "Hm?"

"Do you know what got Meer locked up?"

"We were all told that he erased and conditioned you into swapping rings with him, so he'd have your and Shula's immortality ring."

"I... I don't think he did. I guess I wouldn't remember but I don't think I'm missing time. He said it would be impossible to get - my and Shula's children - into human society the way Shula got in, and that she had to fail, and he'd get a queen who knew things in advance because the rules aren't enforced, and he'd get her a ring of her own instead of sharing, and be the last king. And I - let him swap - but Shula'd swapped mine in my sleep, so he got caught."

"- why did you -"

Celia swallowed. "Is it safe to touch these if I avoid the parts that are on fire?"

"Yeah."

Celia swished her hand through the water, brushed the edges of the plants. "I love her. But it was all too much when I found out about everything. I don't want to be - queen. I don't know if I can get used to the sky here. I don't want her to get me *pregnant* - the other day she -" Celia bit off the sentence; Rai didn't need to know that. "I love her but it's too much, and she wants all of it too much, and it makes her different from how she was. Or how I thought she was, back when everything was just about going to high school and being regular people there. She wants it too much."

Rai was silent, for a while. Leaning over the water planter and fiddling with the end of her braid. "Earth's changed a lot in the last few hundred years."

"Yeah, it has."

"Mother describes herself as having been very excited, about everything. I think Father had to be careful to present it to her without her thinking he was a demon or something, but he managed

to thread that needle, and I assumed that part was easier in the modern day, less ambient belief in demons. It didn't occur to me that there'd be other major differences - I guess you had other things you wanted to do. Mother mostly perceived herself to not have very many other things she might be doing."

"I don't know if it's just that. Maybe if my life sucked otherwise I'd be all over being queen here, but..."

"It's not just that you don't know the planet very well, is it?"

"No. I'm sure I could get to like the planet. But I don't like how it was - offered. It wasn't even offered, it was just something that started happening to me."

"You don't have to marry Shula."

"Don't I, though? Wouldn't there be - fighting over the succession, Meer said -"

"Meer and Tam would have had a fight, yes, and Shula might have gotten into it too, might have bid for another try or something. Because by rights if she failed it would be Meer's turn, and he'd make a terrible king and Tam knows it, and Shula seems like she might be a fine queen but talking to you I'm not so sure. Pax and Dah and Nik and Zi and I wouldn't make trouble. With Meer out of the way - Shula and Tam might fight, but you could make it clear enough that she hadn't managed to win you over by the book that no one would back her against him. Well, not many people. She has some personally loyal servants, but only a handful. It would be a skirmish, not a war."

"And then Tam would, he'd go to Earth and turn into a baby and hide in some family and come back in a couple decades with a fiancée."

"Right."

"That isn't necessarily any better, she might be scared and overwhelmed too, even if he didn't kidnap her mom."

Rai cupped a palmful of water with a burning gleam floating on the center of it, and held it close to her face. "It wouldn't be ideal."

"And the magic's coming in, and it might finish coming in very fast all of a sudden while Tam was pretending to be nine, or Tam's girlfriend might have divination magic like Dad does and know what he was before she was supposed to..."

"And he might die if it turns out the magic includes something planet-scouring. Yes."

"So I do have to marry her."

"No you don't," said Rai.

"But if Tam can't do it either, then -"

"Then something has to change, and you marrying Shula without wanting to isn't it. Father and Mother are not exactly at death's door right now, so we have a little time. The most important thing is figuring out Earth magic so we can prepare humans for that. The next most important thing is - I guess - finding a way to have a final monarch here. Not my parents, they're already getting old, and I don't think they want to live forever. Tam would be fine, or I suppose since succeeding to the eldest hasn't been working out this generation we could do something really wild and hold an election and maybe they'd prefer Pax or Aunt So or a full-blooded plakti -"

"You don't need me?" said Celia, cold relief flooding her like tap water flowing over a burn. "You don't need me to suck it up and -"

"We don't need you," Rai said. "It's okay. You don't have to marry her."

"She scares me," Celia whispered. "She could erase my memories and tell me anything and then I'd be like Mom. Mom thinks she was just sick, the whole time she was actually trapped in Shula's estate. I could wake up in the hospital with a bruise on my head and Shula telling me anything she wanted, if she ever knew I wasn't totally thrilled -"

"If I tell Father and Mother what you've told me, they can recall her from Earth and keep her away from you."

"I don't want her locked up like Meer, though. I still - sometimes she's so - I love her, but -"

"- I promised not to tell anyone until you said it was all right," said Rai, "but she *could* do that and you don't have a way to defend yourself; being safe against memory magic requires having it. Even if you found an excuse to have me around all the time I can't directly protect you, just be ready to - retaliate, if she moves first."

"Right," said Celia softly.

"She hasn't taken your memories yet, that you know of, but you wouldn't necessarily know."

"I don't think I'm missing any time. I haven't been deliriously sick for weeks on end either."

"That's a good sign. But you might not notice a couple minutes."

"She's usually fine, though, she's usually happy and sweet and... normal." And Celia loved her, and Shula loved Celia, and things were usually *good* .

"Okay. If something does happen to you I need to warn people about Earth magic without your say-so, though."

"I guess that makes sense."

"I'm sorry this all caught you up in it."

"We should schedule things," Celia said. "We should meet and talk space plants every week and she'll know you might notice if I were acting weird or skipped. We can actually talk about space plants, they're neat."

"I'd like that," said Rai. "When's good - I don't have any time-specific things, especially if I can work while we chat -"

"Uh, Friday? Do you have the same days of the week?"

"There's local timekeeping, but I track Earth time too, because soon we'll - the idea is that soon we'll be able to go, once the succession is sewn up, but - well, one way or another we'll be able to go one day, and there's some R&D people working on getting us Earth internet connections from here instead of loading page requests onto a box and teleporting them there and back every fifteen minutes."

"That sounds like a terrible job."

"It's not that bad, but I wouldn't want it. Some people like that kind of repetitive simple work and it pays pretty well, lots of plakti want to be on the Earth internet."

"Huh. - Do you think we should go back?"

"Nobody's waving from the window."

"I can't even see in the window from here," Celia said.

"I can. We're fine, if you want to wait till Shula's ready to go back."

"Thank you," Celia murmured.

"This way," said Rai, leading her to a rack of little black herbs in little clay pots. "Next time we can go to the other planet, it has a wider

variety. This planet hasn't recovered completely from the extinction bottlenecks, we have a lot fewer species here than you do. Although they're speciating! I don't go tromping around in the wilderness myself, too dangerous when I'm not an expert at shapeshifting, but my friends and servants bring me things that look different, and take photos."

"Do you have cell phones?" wondered Celia.

"They're different, I'd have to get a new one to get on a plan if I moved to Earth, but yeah." Rai pulled hers out of her pocket. It didn't look science-fictional; the omission of plastic made it more fantasy-looking - the screen was glass, but the housing was red enamel and it had a lacy copper handle on the back that would have let her set the phone on a table and spin it like a lazy susan, or just hold it in her hand from any angle. It was like a magic mirror, but with a five inch square screen. She proceeded through a lot of pictures of plants interspersed with a few animals: bigger versions of the scoop-leaved plant, covered in parasitic vines and surrounded by tufts of dark weeds and heavy layers of what might be fungus. "Earth foliage is green, mostly, but here it's all gotten very dark to absorb more of the light, when there is any. On the farm planet most of the native flora is blue or purple."

"I bet it's pretty."

Rai found pictures of blue grass and purple shrubbery blanketing a collection of knolls, gray-barked trees with branches that chose alien angles to expose their puffs of indigo leaves to the orange light of the sun. The picture had an almost color-treated quality, like someone had gone in and altered a black and white photo with ink, although Celia assumed it was true to life - just taken under a different sun.

"We can go next time," Rai said. "You can see my bunnies."

"Bunnies?"

"Bunnies! Earth rabbits, and alien animals I call bunnies. The farm planet doesn't have native people on it to name the creatures so we just call them anything we want."

"Does it have magic?"

"Nope. It's nice and simple there."

"I can't wait," Celia said.

Shula took her home later that evening, and they went out for ice cream to make up for the fact that dinner had neither included dessert nor inspired much appetite. Celia got a scoop each of triple chocolate and butter pecan. Shula got a weird limited edition flavor with oats and dates in it and had her cone dunked in rainbow sprinkles. They walked around town as they ate, holding hands, switching which side each walked on occasionally as their cone-holding hands got tired or cold. It was nice.

Shula was talking about how her mother - Inabah Ali, her Earth mother - wanted her to go to law school, and Shula was pretending that all she wanted to do was paint and travel rather than explaining the nature of the travel. "Really I'm painting some - I'm sorry about leaving out the paint water on the kitchen table, by the way, I didn't mean to, I'm glad you didn't drink it before you noticed - but I'm mostly spending hilarious amounts of time reading statecraft. Plakti statecraft, not that the human examples can't be instructive for a bit of a change of pace. I was educated in it when I was little back home, of course, but they had to stop when I was twelve. You can't get to a really high level of understanding when you're twelve. And I could do a little bit, at home, they didn't look at my stuff that closely, but I definitely couldn't have anything in a language they didn't know I knew. So I've been catching up since I've moved out and can have an unsupervised bookshelf. They just figured out file conversion from a plakti text format to PDF, did I tell you?"

"I don't think you did," Celia said.

"It took forever! It had to be PDF because there aren't any fonts in some of the languages plakti use, on human computers. PDF is technically an image format so it can just convert straight across, you can't select any text but it works. I had access to a preliminary version that would only convert things that do have font equivalents - plakti use Earth languages now and then - but that's just royal privilege, it's just now available for the general public in its final draft."

"Should I have a plakti language ring?" wondered Celia.

"Believe it or not they're more expensive. If someone makes a ring of a language they can't speak that language any more, see, so it's one thing for someone to invest some time learning an Earth language really well to make money, but it's another to lose the language they actually use most. I can get you one, though, of course. I'm glad you're taking more of an interest in the place now." Shula licked ice cream from her lips and kissed Celia on the cheek.

"- Rai is really cool," Celia volunteered. "The plants were interesting."

"That's really good, I'm glad you got along and that she has someone to talk to about her thing - it's not that I don't like plants, it's that I've always got more on my mind. Did you know that - well, of course you didn't, but, it turns out that opinion polling has been done in a provably misleading way on the plakti world for the last two hundred years and this was only just noticed by a statistician who looked into it. I've been making an exercise of going through all the precedents and changes based on those polls in that time and figuring out whether they would have stood under more accurate numbers, just to make it more real to myself. Do you do anything like that?"

"I like lab work. And field work," Celia said. "I used to think I wanted to be a vet, but I think now I wouldn't like that. People leaving lilies around in a houseful of cats, having to put down people's dogs."

"Just as well, you'll be a little too busy to hold down a veterinary practice after the wedding," said Shula. "You should have lots of time to hang out in Rai's gardens, though."

"I want to go see the ones she has on the other planet, sometime, the farm planet."

"That's a great idea," Shula grinned. Her ice cream was gone. Celia quickly finished hers and started biting the cone.

"What am I going to be busy doing?" Celia asked.

"Mostly ceremonial appearances but we'll need to take petitions, too, and you can do those for me when I'm too busy with legislature or judiciary."

"No separation of powers, huh."

"No. It's a monarchy. I'll have advisers and assistants, and there are regional and local governments, but once I'm queen my word is law. That's why I have to study so much."

"Are you one of your dad's advisers now?" Celia asked.

"Sort of. I sit in with him but I don't have a formal advisory title, just Crown Princess. He takes me seriously, though, and I learn a lot."

"Are you in the middle of a book now?"

" *Thirty Case Studies* . They were trying to avoid being dry but the authors can't help it, that's just how they write, so it's slow going. I'm taking a ton of notes and bringing them by my planet a chapter

at a time to run them by some of the staff, especially Great-Aunt Sha, and Father."

"I don't think you've mentioned Sha before."

"Great-Aunt Sha is pretty great. She was going to be queen but her fiancé left her and she didn't want to try to find another one before her time was up, so she went home and her little brother my grandfather took over and Great-Aunt Sha just does advisory."

"She sounds cool," said Celia. She didn't kidnap her fiancé's mom. That was pretty cool.

"She is! Do you want to meet her?"

"Let me get used to Rai first," said Celia, chuckling weakly.

"All right. I really do appreciate you coming along that last visit."

"I'm glad I went," Celia said honestly.

"Good! So what have you been up to - school, of course, but -"

"School," echoed Celia. "Genetics is going on a field trip, Friday morning. One of those labs with all the genetically identical mice, they're studying cancer but I forget what kind."

"Eugh," said Shula, "giving mice cancer on purpose to watch it happen, that's kind of creepy."

"Well, it's better than people getting it," Celia replied. "Anyway I won't be personally giving any mice cancer, we're just going there to look around and talk to the scientists and I think Sondra's going to angle for an internship. We will not be harming any mice. They probably won't even have us picking them up."

"Apologize to a mouse for me anyway."

"I'd look ridiculous."

"All right, don't apologize to a mouse." Shula patted Celia on the shoulder. "Let them suffer alone."

"I will," snorted Celia.

The field trip on Friday required Celia to get up earlier than she normally did, and she got a ride with Sondra rather than drive to campus. There they boarded a bus and went out to the lab. Their professor knew someone there, and since Celia hadn't gotten into a fancy school with its own genetics lab they were visiting this one instead. It was a long drive. Celia couldn't quite nod off; she wound up half-dozing, jolted awake every few seconds by a pothole or turn juddering her head against the window. She dithered too long about asking Sondra if she'd lend her scarf as a pillow; they were in sight of the lab by the time she decided it would have been worthwhile forty-five minutes ago. It was probably too insubstantial a fabric to make much difference anyway.

They parked in a lot a couple of blocks away. And it was then that Celia noticed her and Shula's own car following, pulling in to a parking space beside them. Lyne, or possibly Cait using Lyne's favorite generic human face for some reason but that seemed less probable, was driving, and Rai was in the passenger seat.

Celia disembarked from the bus, and peeled off from the crowd to meet Rai as she exited the car: "What are you doing here?"

"You said Friday," blinked Rai.

"I meant Friday evening, I meant dinner on Friday, I have class during the day on weekdays - how did you even find me here?"

"I asked Shula, and her phone can find your phone, and we caught up with you and then she got out and went home, and we followed

the bus the rest of the way. Is it a problem? Should I have Lyne take me back and wait?" asked Rai.

"I - uh - hang on," said Celia, and she trotted back to catch the teacher. "Hey, Dr. Daniels, my, uh -" Shula did not publicly have additional siblings besides Amrika, on Earth. No one was going to *check* whether Rai was or was not the sister Shula was understood to have, none of Celia's classmates were likely to even know Shula's ostensible sibling status, but - "- my friend," Celia continued after a too-long pause to fumble for the word, "got mixed up about our plans and followed me all the way here, can she come on the tour? She likes biology and she'll, uh, behave in the lab and stuff."

"I guess that shouldn't be a problem, we're not hitting maximum tour group size," frowned the professor. "Sure, why not."

"Thanks, Dr. Daniels," said Celia, and she went back to collect Rai. "Don't say anything weird," she urged as she led the alien back to the group. Shula had been re-raised on Earth, Shula knew how to behave on either planet, Rai had never been here before. "Maybe just mostly don't talk. And don't touch stuff inside if you're not invited to, okay?"

"Okay," said Rai. "I can pretend I only speak Spanish if that will help."

"No, just pretend you're shy -" They reached earshot of the tour group, and flowed inside with everyone else. The lab was white and clean, the air smelled like mice and rubbing alcohol. Celia wished she'd had a chance to ask Rai if she'd go by some Earth name. Someone on Earth was probably named Rai, but whoever that was would have been able to answer questions about the origin of the name. Celia was certainly overthinking this. More likely nobody cared who Rai was, and if they asked her name to be polite they wouldn't follow up with an inquiry into her ethnic background, and if they

chose to be racist about it there was no need to come up with a plausible lie. Overthinking. She tried to focus on the tour.

The professor met up with his friend and they shook hands and the professor smiled at the class, all smug about what a cool and legitimate researcher of mouse cancers he was friends with, and introduced him as Dr. Strauss. They proceeded into the lab, where scientists were doing objectively horrifying things to mice and interns were performing mundane mouse maintenance.

The mice were all white, all in small groups in small cages stacked six high. Dr. Strauss chattily lectured about the way the mice were cloned, the way they were given cancer, and the trials the lab was running on various drugs to see if they made the mice better or worse or crazy or dead of side effects or more responsive to surgery. Sondra asked if it was hard to do surgery on mice. Another classmate asked how many mice died in this lab every day. Someone else wanted to know if the mice ever had non-clone babies and if they were weird inbred mutants. Sondra raised her hand again and wanted to know if you needed veterinary training to experiment on mice.

Celia glanced over at Rai, who was watching the lecture raptly. Celia wanted to ask her what she was thinking but it wasn't really the time. They moved on to a different section of the lab, where Dr. Strauss told them about their data collection procedures and all the tests they ran on the mice and the samples from the mice, and then the students were allowed to look at mouse samples through microscopes and watch the centrifuge spin and ask more questions about the dyes they used and the cancer progression in the control group and whether they were funded by any of the drug companies that were producing the chemicals they tested (Dr. Strauss rolled his eyes at that one).

Then, anyone who signed a waiver about mouse bites was allowed to hold a mouse, one of the young ones that didn't have cancer yet,

and weigh their mice on the fancy scale and enter their data into the fancy database. Celia signed the waiver - Rai hung back, not being a student.

Celia chose a mouse that was busy eating, since with its mouth full it looked less likely than the unoccupied mice to decide biting her was a good idea, but then she realized she was going to have to take the pellet clutched in its paws away to get an accurate weight. She pinched the pellet between her fingers and pulled.

And pulled, and pulled.

The mouse let go. The pellet stayed right under its busy mouth. Celia held it up at eye level; it didn't have the pellet clenched in its teeth. The pellet was just hanging there, as though glued to its lip. But when she tugged again, the mouse's lip didn't stretch at all. The pellet just didn't move.

She spun on her heel - no one was watching her or her difficulty with the mouse's pellet, there was a line for the scale and she wasn't dawdling too much. She showed Rai the mouse, demonstrated the ineffective hauling. Rai's eyes went wide, but she didn't say anything.

Celia didn't want to put the magic mouse back and risk someone else trading theirs in for it. She held onto it, hoping it would be done eating by the time she got a weight. It was, and it had also peed on her hand. She set the creature on the scale, accepted directions to the handwash station, came back, recorded the mouse's mass, and recaged it.

"I can give you a ride," Rai said, after they'd finished the tour and their little hands-on activity.

"Yeah," said Celia, "sure," and she got in the back seat beside Rai, and Lyne, who'd been waiting with a magazine in the car, pulled out ahead of the bus and headed back toward campus.

Celia and Rai couldn't talk freely in front of Shula's servant. They exchanged meaningful looks and sat silently. Eventually Celia told Lyne to turn on the radio and tried to enjoy her favorite station (Lyne remembered it, of course) the rest of the way home.

Lyne dropped them off in the campus lot, since Celia had more classes yet to come, but her next one wasn't for a couple of hours. She led Rai to the park bench by the pond and plopped down, full of nervous tension. Rai sat next to her.

"Telekinesis," said Celia. "Or something like it, anyway. I guess it's not genetic. The mice are all clones and somebody would have noticed if lots of them were telekinetic."

"Clones," said Rai softly. "All of them were clones, they didn't have parents -"

"That wasn't really my main takeaway," said Celia, "now we know what another kind of Earth magic is and it could be bad if big enough stuff gets moved around."

"Oh - yes," said Rai. "Yes, of course, it's just..."

"What?" said Celia.

"We wouldn't need to worry about interbreeding or any of the complications that come with it," said Rai, "if you could clone plakti."

Celia spent some of her downtime looking up reports of paranormal effects on the Internet. She didn't find very much, and what she did find was too widely varied for more than half of it to be based in fact. Maybe Rai didn't know if planets always had exactly five kinds of magic, but if plakti had five and the one dead world had four confirmed that suggested Earth probably wasn't getting twenty. Then again, some plakti magic varieties were flexible enough to look like several kinds, especially if combined - but both Celia's dad and

her mouse had displayed only one variety apiece - not that they'd observed the mouse enough to know if it could also create portals to alternate dimensions -

When she visited Rai on the farm planet, they pruned blue ferns that Rai and some plakti scientists were trying to convince to reproduce via cuttings. They weeded indigo vegetables, exotic cultivars of them (as opposed to all the normal cultivars of indigo vegetable), and scraped useful parasitic mushrooms off of purple-leafed trees. And Celia asked, "What does having magic *feel like*?"

"Gosh. That's a question," said Rai. "It - it feels - hm. What does having hair feel like?" Rai's hair was currently in a style she'd called "raspberry vanilla", mostly magenta with ombre down to white tips.

"Hair doesn't feel like much of anything," said Celia. "It doesn't have any nerves."

"Right. But you'd notice, probably right away, if you woke up and someone had shaved your head overnight," said Rai. "You'd probably even notice if someone took off two inches, because doing anything with your hair would be a little different, and it'd hit your arms in a different place. It fades into the background, and you can't feel your hair directly, but it brushes your neck and you think, oh, I could put it up in a ponytail, or you just go about your life not noticing that it isn't there, because it is. Having magic is like that."

"Does that mean my dad would have noticed," said Celia, "if he started having magic one day and wasn't born with it?"

"I don't know for sure," said Rai. "Maybe it's like letting your hair grow out - maybe he wasn't born with it but it grew in slowly."

"How hard do you really want to lean on the hair analogy?" wondered Celia.

"It's a good analogy," said Rai loftily. "Anyway, I was born with magic, and it didn't have to grow in -"

"Oh god, firebug babies," said Celia in sudden horror.

"Well, yes, but it takes a little practice to make something actually catch," said Rai, "and everyone around us can put out the fires, and heal with shapeshifting. It does mean it's not a good idea to leave babies born here unsupervised for long, though, things could get out of hand."

"Even if we - if we don't have to evacuate Earth, which we probably do," said Celia, "everything's going to change - babies with telekinesis and prophecy -"

"And whatever else," said Rai. "And the animals and plants. Yeah. It's going to be hard and complicated. I'm just glad we're already in contact and we can help Earth with this."

"...I have to let you tell people, don't I," said Celia. "It's too important."

"I mean," said Rai, "sooner or later, it won't matter if I've told anyone or not."

"Right," Celia said, staring out over a field of flowers. Their blue stems and leaves made their many-colored blossoms look like balloons against the sky. "A ficus starts telekinetically levitating its pot on reality television. An ant colony with divination terrorizes a town. Everybody and their cousin knows somebody with at least one kind of magic."

Rai nodded.

Celia gazed out at blue fields and the strange-colored sun. She picked up one of the alien bunnies and scratched it behind the eyes,

which was apparently the favored scratching location for alien bunnies. "Okay," she said. "You can tell your family."

"Thank you," said Rai, taking Celia's hand and squeezing it. "We'll find a way to help. Is there a way I can contact your dad, if we think that will be a good idea?"

"I can give you his phone number. If you know how to use an Earth phone," said Celia.

"That will do," said Rai, dropping Celia's hand to rearrange some mulch in a planter.

Celia hung out in the alien garden for a few more hours, asking about the plants and helping brush the bunnies' fur. (The wads of loose fur that came off on the brushes were made into wool, Rai told her.) And then Rai gave her a teleport home.

Shula was out - clubbing, Celia expected, soaking up noise and dance, something she'd picked up as a hobby to thumb her nose at her (Earth) parents under the radar. Celia had gone a couple of times and hadn't liked the close, hot atmosphere or the unavoidable aura of imminent sexuality with strangers, so instead when Shula and Celia danced they did it at home, but Shula went out sometimes anyway.

If it had been Celia with the clubbing hobby probably Shula would have been upset about it, worried Celia would pick up a girl there. Celia thought about it and wasn't sure she'd care if Shula did, except for the part of her that was pretending she was a wronged Montana resident who hadn't seen her beloved Shula in years and was desperately jealous of the imaginary club girl.

Well, that aside.

Celia's phone noticed it had service and bleeped. Amrika had gotten around to texting her. *Hey, Celia! Let's catch up soon! Are you free Sunday?*

Celia was free Sunday but Shula wasn't, she had plans on the plakti world. Amrika hadn't asked about Shula, though. Presumably she and Shula had already worked out some mutually agreeable sisterly habit of keeping in touch. Amrika wanted to catch up with Celia because - Celia was Shula's best friend? Because she suspected Celia was not in fact Shula's "best friend"? For some reason.

Before answering the text, Celia decided to call her dad.

He answered on the first ring. "Hi, sweetheart."

"Hi dad. Uh, Amrika texted me like you said she would. And I've been talking to Rai a lot about things. Thanks for telling me I could trust her. Um, I gave her - Rai, not Amrika - your phone number, she might give you a call to talk to you about using your magic to find more magic. I met a mouse with telekinesis the other day and it was - it was kind of scary."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay, I can't expect you to warn me about everything."

"Mice can have telekinesis. That's... that's something," said David.

"Dad - *plants* can have telekinesis. I've been learning more about Shula's planet. It's not just weird because of not having a sun, it had a horrible catastrophe when everything could use their magic and nothing was adapted for it. So we're - we're going to have that, here. Your thing and the mouse's thing and whatever else there is."

"Oh," said David. "I'll talk to Rai. I don't know how much I can help."

"Maybe Rai knows a safe way to check if you can use it more if you go off your meds," said Celia reluctantly. "Or - or something."

"I think you should meet Amrika," David said abruptly.

"Do you know why?"

"No."

"Do you know if the magic is - good at 'should'? Does that mean I won't regret meeting her or what?"

"I don't know," apologized David. "It might be that. It might be that if you told me about it later I'd think it had been a good idea? Did that make sense?"

"Maybe," said Celia. "Okay. I don't see how it could go badly, anyway... I'll talk to her."

"Your uncle Joe's calling me," David said. Celia could hear Joe's voice faintly over the phone. "I should hang up."

"Okay. Bye Dad. I love you."

"Love you too, Celia."

The line went dead. Celia texted Amrika back. *I think Shula's busy that day so I have it wide open.*

Amrika got back to her fifteen minutes later. Celia used the time to pretend to tidy up the kitchen. Lyne and Cait handled all the real chores and Celia had nothing to do at a loose end. She'd just about finished deciding that she didn't need to throw out the leftover Thai food and should do some homework instead when Amrika texted back; she wanted to meet at Celia and Shula's place for lunch and was decorously deferential about how Celia didn't need to cook for

her, she could grab something on the way, it was just noon was the best time.

Celia said noon would be fine and she could probably have something ready for lunch. (She could ask Lyne or Cait to fix something that would be good cold, that morning, maybe chicken salad and flatbread; they'd never wonder. It wasn't even illicit to have Amrika over, was it? Why didn't she want Shula to know, why wasn't she texting Shula about it right away?)

Amrika said that would be great.

Celia texted Lyne that she wanted chicken salad and flatbread that day, enough to have leftovers to bring to campus for lunch. Lyne replied that this would be done.

Celia didn't like having servants, most of the time - they were so *omnipresent*, they had to be to do their jobs, Lyne knew what chicken salad recipe she liked and that she preferred the relatively humane expensive chicken from the expensive butcher as long as everything was on Shula's royal dime, Lyne knew all these things and Celia didn't know anything about Lyne at all except that he belonged, more or less, to Shula.

Well. Sometimes it was convenient. She'd be able to give Amrika a nice lunch without cooking it herself.

She wondered if Shula had hated not having servants, when she was growing up the second time. Or did her various household staff, however part-time, count? The gardener, the maid. One of the servants had posed as a nanny, right? Celia forgot which one. Lyne and Cait weren't easy to distinguish even when they were using their typical unremarkable human forms - not that they looked alike, Cait generally pretended to be African-American man and Lyne was usually a white lady - but they served such identical roles, and when they did change things up it could be any which way. Did plakti even have gender? Celia suspected they didn't. But Shula was mostly

human - Shula had a gender - Shula didn't like "practicing" either, it was a sacrifice both of them were making.

(Celia shuddered, just a little.)

She forced her thought elsewhere. Homework. She had homework to do so she could learn the material so she could pass the class so she could get the degree -

- she didn't have to marry Shula, Rai had said -

- maybe one day she'd even do something with the things she was learning.

She did her lab writeup.

On Sunday Amrika turned up at the apartment. There was flatbread keeping warm in the dying heat of the oven; there was cold chicken salad in the fridge. Celia served both and told Amrika what spices were in the recipe without admitting she hadn't made it herself.

"- so how's married life?" Celia asked blandly.

"I'm - it's wonderful," said Amrika, "Haidar is lovely, but I'm quite suddenly worried that there might be some kind of problem running in my family and we're talking about having kids - can I ask you something?"

"Yeah?"

"When's your earliest memory?" Amrika asked.

"Uh, I think I was four, I remember drawing on the wall in Sharpie," said Celia, "Mom was furious."

"I think I don't clearly remember anything before I was about seven," said Amrika, "and it's spotty after that, and Haidar thinks that isn't normal, but Shula says it's the same for her, and Mom said

she can remember being five but mostly goes by pictures to remember *me* being five and maybe I was just a really unmemorable five year old - that sounds bad but she meant it as a joke -"

"Well -" said Celia, trying to breathe around the chill in her chest, "well, I -"

"Haidar wants to get me screened for God only knows what," said Amrika. "In case it'd pass on to children, or in case I have brain cancer or something, you see - I'm sorry, I'd meant for this to be a nice catch-up -"

"No, it's fine," said Celia. This wasn't fine. It was probably not against the rules. It was probably standard operating procedure. If Shula had to be a baby to cuckoo into an Earth family, she had to make Mrs. Ali think she was pregnant, and make everyone who would notice she hadn't been think so too. There was probably a solid month gone around Shula's Earth birthday to cover for the lack of postpartum recovery, the lack of a go-bag by the door ready for rushing to the hospital - maybe one of the servants had shredded the Ali's memories of before that too, to make time for prenatal appointments to have been tucked in. If Shula was a twelve year old mind in a one month old body, there would be slipups, behavior out of character for an infant, a toddler, a preschooler. She'd have had a Spanish accent while she was learning Arabic, at first - she'd have probably wanted to spare herself the indignity of diaper changes, that must have taken a shotgun to the first couple of years of memories - she'd -

"Thank you," Amrika sighed. "It's just been on my mind a lot."

"Do you have a better memory these days?" Celia asked, taking a bite of her wrap.

"Yes, much," agreed Amrika. "So I'm not *too* worried it's the brain cancer one, but still."

Celia's gut twisted. Amrika deserved to know. Celia's mouth wouldn't open. She chewed her over-chewed mouthful of chicken salad a little more to excuse her silence. It went on a little too long. Little sounds magnified themselves - cars outside, the refrigerator humming, the pretty analog clock Shula had gotten to decorate the bookshelf ticking. A crow cawed. There was a crackle of a lightbulb burning out overhead. Amrika and Celia both looked up. For a moment the bulb was dark, and then it glowed again. Celia shrugged and went back to her lunch, trying to think of something to say.

Amrika spoke first. Little stories about Bolivia. She showed Celia some of the best pictures - "No more than five, I promise not to spend all afternoon pretending you're more interested than you are - " and finally she patted Celia's hand and said she'd like to see more of her in the future. Not at all a mention of whether she was okay with the gay thing or not, but a gesture of goodwill, perhaps - don't ask, don't tell.

Amrika let herself out into the hallway and the lightbulb went instantly and silently dark.

Celia blinked, then climbed as fast as she could onto the table to reach up and touch the glass. It was cold.

"Amrika!" Celia caught up with her halfway down the stairs, her voice echoing off the walls.

"What is it?" asked Amrika, pausing. "Did I forget something?"

Celia should have thought this through, should have taken thirty extra seconds to figure out how to say something and caught Amrika in the parking lot instead. She gawked blankly at Amrika instead. Amrika looked up at the next flight of steps, waited patiently.

Finally, Celia said, "Did you know you have magic powers?"

"...I can't say that I do," said Amrika slowly.

"It's, it's light, there's a thing with light -"

"Is this an awkward missionary pitch? I'm a Muslim, Celia, I'm not in the market."

"No! No, it's - do me a favor?"

"What?"

"Can you try to make, um, make the -" She didn't know exactly what Amrika's magic could do, that was the problem, if she picked a trick based on fixing electronic objects and the magic was actually about light or localized time travel that had given the lightbulb a new lease on life that just happened to end when Amrika left - "Can you come back and - the lightbulb, it - can you come back?"

"Celia -"

"I know I - I know I sound -" Celia didn't add the word *insane* . "But can you come look at it, I don't know how to explain -"

Amrika hesitated a long, long time. Then she turned and came up the stairs again and followed Celia back to the apartment.

Celia had left the door ajar. She pushed her way in, pointed at the burned out lightbulb. "We both heard that make a burning-out sound, right?"

"It flickered back on a minute later."

"Amrika, you're an electrician, is that normal?"

"You get all kinds of crazy wiring jobs -"

"Is it *normal* ."

"No, I wouldn't say it was normal."

"Can you try to make it light up again?"

"I don't have my toolbag -"

"No, I mean, I think - I think it actually burned out, when we heard the sound, and then it looked like it was on because you wanted it to be on, and then when you left it was dark again. I want you to give it a real, fair, good faith try, but that's all, if you really can't do it I'll stop asking."

"Celia, this is ridiculous."

"It's not. You think I wouldn't have dropped it same as you - figured I misheard the noise or there was a brownout or something - but I know what this is," said Celia firmly. "I can't show you, I don't have anything myself to show you, but you can show yourself."

Amrika took a deep breath and rolled her eyes and stared down the lightbulb. For a few seconds, nothing happened.

It glowed and Amrika screamed, so loud that Celia thought she'd have the neighbors running. Amrika shook her head and the bulb dimmed, then darkened.

"You did it," Celia said in a low voice.

"I was," Amrika said. "I was, I was waiting to actually try so you wouldn't know exactly when to pull whatever prank -" "How did you - what is it that you know?" Amrika breathed, groping for a chair and lowering herself into it.

Celia shut her eyes tightly. "I'm not sure where to start."

"From the - beginning?" offered Amrika weakly.

"- Shula's not your sister." As soon as she'd said it she wanted to take it back, that wasn't true, Shula treated her Earth family like her family. "I mean, she's your - she's adopted? But not conventionally adopted, there's - let me start over."

"Okay," mouthed Amrika, barely making a sound.

"There's aliens," Celia began again. "The aliens are called plakti. They live on a planet without a sun and they can - teleport and do fire magic and put - here," Celia interrupted herself, taking off her Spanish ring. Stupid, stupid, she had demonstrable magic encircling her fingers at all times and just *forgot* about it. She fumbled it onto Amrika's unresisting finger. "Buenas tardes. ¿Cómo está usted?" Celia said.

"Aah!" cried Amrika, wrestling the ring off.

"Sorry," said Celia, taking it back and putting it where it belonged on her hand. "I just - the aliens are magic. And they can erase memories. And there's some - some stupid reason, it will sound so dumb if I tried to explain it - why they have to put kids in human families - Shula wasn't a baby, she shapeshifted - they can shapeshift -"

"You're just making this up as you go along," said Amrika shrilly.

"No, no, I swear I'm not - there's only the five things, I think I've said all of - no, most of them now. Fire and shapeshifting and teleporting and the rings and the memory erasure. You were - you were talking about -"

"You're making this up!" said Amrika, but she was looking fearfully at Celia's rings. It was Celia's day to wear the immortality ring. It was several rings.

"I'm not," said Celia softly. "I'm not making it up. Shula's part alien but mostly human, and she has alien magic, and when she was

twelve, she shapeshifted into a baby and one of her servants - she's royalty -"

"This is just a list of all the most outrageous, unbelievable things you could think of -"

"And," Celia said, ignoring her, "she grew up over again with your family, and whenever anything happened you couldn't explain to yourselves, she or her servant who posed as her nanny for a while -"

"Stop it -"

"- would erase your memory so you wouldn't remember that your mom hadn't been pregnant, or that you'd seen her doing something unbabylike, or -"

"I'm going crazy," Amrika said flatly. "That's what this is. I need to call Haidar and tell him I'm having some kind of breakdown just like he was worried about."

"And then she met me and it's alien royal tradition to marry an Earthling," Celia whispered, "but what she doesn't know is that our planet's getting its own magic, and people from here are starting to get it - not just people, but plants and animals too - and you have it - you saw."

"It was my imagination," said Amrika, "and you're crazy, too, not that it's surprising -"

" *You saw* ," repeated Celia, louder, more strident. "You could do it again. You could show Haidar, it's not common knowledge now but it will be whenever a pigeon starts fucking with streetlights in some downtown or somebody's aloe plant starts glowing. You have magic light powers, and you're not the only one, and I know all this because Shula's a space princess who came to Earth to get -"

"I'd guessed you two were up to some - something," sputtered Amrika, "I wasn't going to say anything about it but I didn't realize she was telling you she could *marry* you - our parents will -"

"She's keeping up with your family more or less for some reason, I don't know why, but she's not going to let your parents tell her not to marry me," says Celia. "Because she wants to be queen."

"I - I can't -" Amrika murmured.

"Try doing stuff," said Celia. "Stuff with light. If it doesn't work you can write me off, sure, but if you never try it aren't you always going to wonder?"

Amrika hesitated, staring at her hands.

And then the burnt-out lightbulb glowed, and Amrika looked up as though watching a meteor streak towards her, and the glow descended silently from the bulb into Amrika's cupped hands, a sphere of gentle yellow light. It was pretty. There were a few tears on Amrika's cheeks, and it made them sparkle.

"Sorry," whispered Celia.

"If I thought this was your fault," replied Amrika at the same volume, "we'd have a problem."

Rai, communicating by text, invited Celia to the plakti world to talk to her family about "everything". Celia agreed to come talk about everything the next day.

Everything. There was too much everything. Her parents, Shula, her planet, Amrika who Rai didn't even know about yet. The succession; the looming ecological crisis that would sweep the earth as telekinetic cat prophets drove light-controlling songbirds to extinction or whatever else might be going to happen. There was so very much

everything and Celia was drained, withdrawn, because after she'd sent that text Shula had decided it was time to practice and unpeeled a condom and - practiced.

Surely at some point a convenient chunk of everything would present itself as an excuse to break it off. Surely something would happen, and she'd have a good enough reason and conspicuous enough support that Shula wouldn't just not let her break up with her.

At any rate, she told Rai when to pick her up, and told Shula she was going to hang out with Rai. Shula approved. Rai fetched her. Celia shuffled her feet a little, then gratefully dropped into a chair when the Queen indicated one to her. This was all more important than how she happened to be feeling.

"Rai's been telling us what you told her," said Pax. "How long has Earth had magic?"

"I only know how long ago my dad remembers having it," said Celia, "and he can't be sure because - uh, because he has schizophrenia, and his magic is knowing stuff, but until he could verify any of it it's hard to be sure of the difference, he could have had it since he was my age but we don't know for sure that he had it any more than a couple of years back. The other ones were more recent."

"Other ones?" said Tam. "Rai mentioned a mouse."

"There was the mouse, yeah, with the telekinesis, and - uh, Shula's - Shula's sis- Amrika, do you know about her?"

"Yes," said Nik. "Host sister. She has magic?"

"She came over for lunch - Shula wasn't there - and a lightbulb burned out, but then it looked like it hadn't, but it was off again when she left - she has light control magic."

"So that's three," muttered Dah.

"The telekinesis could be very bad," said Pax. "The other two don't sound like as much of a catastrophe, and none of them are going to keep going independent of the originating organism the way fire can, but it's still bad, and there might be more on the horizon..."

"Yeah," said Celia.

"We have to reveal ourselves," said Nik.

"No we don't," said Tam. "We could pretend to be some other kind of aliens, have someone do the living spaceship trick and walk off looking like Star Trek -"

"You watch Star Trek?" asked Celia in bewilderment.

"Little bit," said Tam. "Not the point. We can pretend we're the civ from the dead planet, make like some of them evacuated -"

"We're not positive none of them *did*," Dah said, "we haven't gotten a clear enough picture from the ruins to be certain -"

"Or we can make up our own species and say it evacuated, we don't have to admit to anything about plakti civilization per se," said Tam. "And invite Earthlings to evacuate Earth."

"Doesn't that seem needlessly complicated?" asked Rai.

"No. We don't know what they're going to turn up with besides those three things, and if first open contact doesn't go well," said Tam, "then we might not want them to know what we're really like or where to really find us -"

It was a little surreal, listening to a young man who could have walked in his natural form down any street on Earth without getting

a second glance, talking about humanity as "them". Celia said, "The divination, though."

"It'd catch that?"

"It caught Shula." It caught that Celia's mom was being held captive on another planet, impersonated by a plakti servant.

"She never said," said Pax.

"She doesn't know," said Celia, not looking at any of them. Studying the fire dancing in the brazier in the middle of the room.

There was silence.

Rai said, "I think I might know enough to get on with now you've corroborated that I'm not making this up, Celia - do you want to go home -"

"- Can you take me to my dad's place?" Celia asked. "Not home. I want to visit my dad."

"Sure," said Rai. "Where does he live?"

Celia gave the address, looking at her hands where they were clasped in her lap.

Rai took two steps toward her and they were there, inside her dad's apartment.

"My uncle could have been here," said Celia, blinking, unable to muster much alarm.

"Does it really matter, at this point?" asked Rai gently.

"I guess not," said Celia. What was one more difficult revelation, what with all the everything. "Dad?"

Her father was in the kitchen, making hot cocoa. "Saw you coming," he said, handing Celia a mug. Rai excused herself and disappeared.

Celia plopped on the couch and David sat beside her with his own mug. She leaned on him a little, blowing on the surface of the drink. She sipped.

"I should text Shula," she remarked eventually. "Get her or Lyne or Cait to pick me up and take me home before I have a class. Before she worries."

"I'm not going to stop you," said David in a low voice.

"Rai's telling her family about Earth getting magic. She's not mentioning much of my personal stuff with Shula." She blew on the cocoa again. "Maybe it'll all be better when Rai figures out how to clone plakti, and it's clear they can't keep doing the traditional monarchy forever..." It'd certainly eliminate any need to "practice". Maybe that was even why she was so paranoid about Celia cheating, maybe there was a rule that adultery invalidated the engagement -

"I don't know," said David. "I'm sorry."

"I love her," said Celia. Maybe if she didn't need Celia for the throne she'd come to the conclusion that Celia had really tried to kill her instead of rationalizing it away, and then Shula would dump *her* .

"I know you do," David said.

Outside the window there was a collective scream as something huge whooshed directly upward, past the apartment building and into the sky. Celia jumped, nearly spilled her cocoa, put it down, and ran to the window. Suspended a hundred feet above the road was a car, the driver still inside it but not conscious - maybe not alive, the way her head was lolling - and everyone on the ground level was pointing and shrieking -

"Dad," said Celia, "let's - let's show this to Uncle Joe and - text Rai that we want to evacuate sooner than later -"

"Evacuate?" he said.

"I don't know if that was a person who didn't know what they were doing or an animal or a dandelion," Celia said, throwing the curtains wide, "but it's just going to happen more and more - and there's this nice farm planet the plakti have colonized - Rai has critters there -"

"Right," said David. "Right. I'll get Joe, you tell your mother -"

Celia nodded. She texted Maureen. *Seen the news lately?* for an opener so she'd know where to start.

Celia fed all the chickens and watered all the cats and "bunnies" and unpacked a shipment of more cages and water bottles for more animal preservation efforts. Six sites across the farm planet for land animals so far, and six aquariums, and dozens of farms and gardens under construction, trying to hold all Earth's biodiversity and be ready to supply, redundant in case the screen failed and something got off Earth already bearing magic. They were expecting more animals today, and Celia would be transferring snakes and pouring water for them with gloved hands, antivenin in her pocket. There were plakti looking for more colonizable planets.

There were people on the ground on Earth collecting refugees, as people packed and made their peace with the exodus in a piecemeal torrent. The only really dangerous stuff was teekay, a precognitive invisible tiger could only do so much worse than a visible one - but the teekay was bad. Animals usually weren't uncontrollably destructive with it, an animal wouldn't understand a bullet in time to catch it out of the air if you had to shoot flying bears - but plants had simple feedback mechanisms and reached for the sun and brought up a little or a lot of earth with them -

Not to mention humans. Most people still had no magic at all, and being surprised with telekinesis when you didn't know your own strength could be bad. That dead woman in the car flung up in the sky had been thrown by a human, frightened of a collision that might or might not have happened otherwise but probably wouldn't have killed anybody. His case was in legal limbo; it was unclear if it was even legal to charge him and unlikely that it was cost-effective to hold him in prison.

Celia checked the quarantine section video feeds, when her feet needed a break from trotting up and down the aisles of cages and she was between tasks. The new frogs weren't showing any signs; she panned through hours at triple speed, watching for flies that juked suspiciously tongueward or jumps that didn't seem to obey the laws of physics. They were drawing the line at five days. Celia didn't know how Rai had picked the number, and in fact suspected it was random, but she'd move the frogs to their new home the next morning if there were still no tells of Earth magic stuck to them by then.

When she left the building, done for the day with work and ready to pick up dinner and go home, it sounded like construction. Somebody telekinetic was on the job, along with other contractors. Girders and pallets went flying this way and that; plakti teleported in new supplies now and then. She smelled sawdust and the workers hollered at each other in what she thought might be Portuguese.

Dinner was takeout from the food trucks scattered around the fledgeling town. Celia got hot dogs and fish and chips, and waited in the park until, five minutes later, Shula appeared.

Shula kissed her and took one of the hot dogs. "Earth style kitchen implements are going to be all installed in the estate kitchen by early next week, they say."

"Oh good," said Celia, "it's not that I don't like food trucks but none of them have my mom's tuna casserole recipe."

Celia's mom herself had not evacuated yet. Celia had not tried very hard to encourage her to.

"I'm not sure it's going to be easy to get tuna," warned Shula.

"Shouldn't dating a princess have privileges like that?"

"That'll work till there's no canned tuna left and nobody willing to try to fish Earth oceans because they'll get flattened by the tidal waves, but I can stockpile some now if you want me to."

"Yes please." Celia kissed her. The deadline to get married had softened so much with everything else in a hurricane of emergency, and with the plakti cloning project underway there was no reason to "practice" and so many distractions and opportunities in every direction, and that, Celia thought, would be good enough.

Khan

Seth rang the doorbell, and Justin opened the door, a baby on his shoulder. Justin was white and the baby was Asian; Seth did a double-take at that one, but figured the wife must just have a lot of dominant genes. "Seth! Welcome chez Weaver," Justin said, smiling, "come in."

Seth stepped in. "It's good to meet you in person, Justin," he said. The house was fancy. Smooth stone tile, radiant heat coming up from underneath. Fancy, expensive-looking artwork on display, lit like museum pieces - an abstract painting here, a little table with a ceramic breaching dolphin next to a vase of flowers there. The walls were done in glossy slate blue paint, the molding in white.

Justin took his hand off the baby's back to shake Seth's. "Good to meet you too. Sorry, I thought all the kids would be asleep by the time you arrived but Ming is doing the need-another-hug thing and wakes up when I put her down."

"It's not a problem," Seth assured him. "Is your wife home?"

"Yes, she is - Mary?" Justin called.

Mary stepped into the foyer. She was gorgeous, and she wasn't Asian either, so the baby was adopted or babysat, and either one was fine with Seth. Mary smiled at him. "Hi - Seth, right?"

"That's right," said Seth. "This is a lovely house. I bet the mortgage is a heck of a thing."

"Oh, it's ours outright," said Mary. "I inherited it from my parents, I grew up here - we would have gone with something more modest,

but it would be such a wrench to sell it even if we don't need all this space -"

"How about that," said Seth, "that's lucky."

A timer went off with a soft ding in the kitchen. Mary ran to silence it, and Justin said, "That's twenty minutes, Ming's probably asleep for good now. I'll go try to put her down and then we can have some cookies and chat, all right?"

"Sounds good to me," said Seth, helping himself to an armchair in the living room. There were a bunch of plastic miniature megafauna hiding in the long fibers of the rug, and a stray few Legos under the coffee table.

"Great," said Justin, swaying off to the nursery.

"She's a cute kid," Seth commented to Mary. "You get her from... China?"

"Yes," said Mary. "And Ioana is from Romania, and Valeria is from Colombia."

"Can't have kids?" asked Seth.

Mary's brow creased a little. "We don't have any reason to believe we can't, but there are so many children who need homes and families already, so we've chosen to adopt." It had the air of a rehearsed statement.

"Gotcha," said Seth. "I haven't found any biological nieces or nephews so far. Destiny's gay, Darius is a teenager, and Justin's the first one I found online."

"Well, hopefully you'll get along all right with our girls regardless," said Mary briskly.

"I'm sure I will," said Seth.

Justin came back holding a plate of jam dots. "I think Ming's down," he said. "Seth, when I got your message, I was so surprised - I'd never had any idea that my dad wasn't my biological dad. Weaver was his last name. I'm not sure whether to tell him - it doesn't matter to me, but if it affected his memories of Mom, well, that wouldn't do anyone any good. Is - our mutual father - is George still alive?"

"No, I'm sorry," said Seth, suddenly subdued. He took a jam dot anyway. "George died recently, actually. I think I was one of only a couple of the kids that he kept in touch with - and it kind of prompted me to go looking for others. I knew it couldn't just be me and Destiny and Darius."

"What did he die of?" asked Mary. "If you don't mind saying."

"I don't mind, we weren't close for all that he appeared in my life every year or two. It was violence, actually - Darius went after him - see, not everybody George had kids with was a hookup or a girlfriend, some of them were just -" Seth trailed off, made a vague gesture. "So Darius, he's sixteen, and he was mad about what happened to his mother when he found out, and he knew where to get a gun."

"Oh, no," breathed Mary, clutching Justin's hand. Justin looked troubled, and patted his wife on the arm.

"Yes. I can't really blame Darius, that could have been me if I'd been in his shoes. I hope he makes out well when it comes time. He's a good kid. Anyway. I've found a few of us on 23andMe, and that can't be everyone, plenty of our siblings are going to be too young or too foreign to sign up or just not interested. Since George isn't around to ask, I can't be certain we'll ever know them all. He's been flying all over the country, and out of it, leaving children conceived this way and that, for the last forty-five years."

"I wish I could ask my mother," Justin said. "I don't know how I'd put it gently, but - I wish I could ask."

"What happened to her?" asked Seth.

"Oh, she was older, when she had me, older than I am now. Old age, died in her sleep."

"And you're how old now?"

"Thirty-four," said Justin.

"I'm twenty-eight," Seth said. "George kinda - he didn't quit. Never caught for anything he did. Finding our whole family is going to be a major undertaking." He raked his hands through his hair, disarranging it picturesquely. "But everybody I find is progress! So I'm really glad to be here tonight. What do you do, Justin?"

"I'm a stay at home dad for our three, but before we adopted Ioana I was a sculptor, and I still am for small pieces when I can find time," said Justin. "And Mary's a pastor."

"And what about you?" Mary asked Seth.

"I'm an attorney," said Seth.

"Prosecution or defense?" wondered Justin.

"Defense. Right to representation and all that."

Justin nodded. There was a silence. Mary took a jam dot.

"Justin," said Seth, "there's something I'd like to talk to you about alone - if that's all right with you too, Mary," he added, nodding in her direction.

"Mary can hear anything I can hear," said Justin.

"And you can tell her later. I don't mind. Just - it's hard enough to spit it out when I'm only talking to my brother," Seth said, turning pleading eyes on the couple. "Please."

Mary and Justin looked at each other dubiously. Finally Mary patted her husband on the shoulder, kissed his cheek, and disappeared to parts elsewhere.

"She seems lovely," Seth told Justin.

"She is. Light of my life," said Justin. "I was very lucky to find her. I assume that's not the secret."

"It's not," acknowledged Seth. "You're sure she wouldn't be listening around corners?"

"She'll probably have gone to bed. We have a new baby, we're tired."

"All right then." Seth took a deep breath. "You need to get a vasectomy."

"- what?"

"I was really glad when I found out your kids were all adopted. Adopt as many as you want. There shouldn't be more of us."

"I don't really hold with all that genetic supremacy nonsense - if George committed crimes in the course of siring us all, that reflects on him only, not -"

"I'm not saying we're genetically evil. It's complicated, and I'm not sure you'll believe me, but the upshot is *don't have biological kids*."

"Am I a carrier for some disease -"

"No. It's the opposite, really. Can you let me explain without - I don't know, calling an ambulance on me for being a loon? I'm not a loon

and I can go through all the evidence for you, it's just fundamentally kind of hard to swallow."

"- sure. Why not."

"Let's start with what I can guess about *you* . When you met Mary, you were both in the right mood and the right place in your lives to have exactly the kind of relationship you wanted out of life. Her parents left her the house - maybe by dying, maybe by retiring to Florida - right when you felt like it was time you and she had a house. You have found the adoption process to be smooth and swift and your daughters to adjust quickly to joining your family. They all get along with each other and if any of them are old enough to attend school they do well there. You have exactly enough minor complaints about their behavior that you don't feel like an alien when you talk to other parents but no more. You don't know what other people are talking about when they complain about long lines at the DMV. You have never gotten a parking ticket or a moving violation no matter how badly you drive, and no one has ever rear-ended you. You have never been stolen from, harassed, shouted at by a crazy person on the street, defrauded, or assaulted. You always get the nice seats in restaurants, the nice customer service agents on the phone, and the nice presents during any gimmicky present exchanges you participate in around Christmas. If you have in-laws, you get along with them. Your neighbors like you. When you were a kid, if you wanted to be picked from an audience to participate on stage, you got picked, every time."

"- horoscope stuff," said Justin.

"No. Most people don't live like that," said Seth. "People have ups and downs. And so do you - I didn't say you never sprained an ankle, or that you never had a crisis of faith or whatever it is religious people have, or that you are beloved by every dog you meet. For all I know you fell off a cliff when you were twelve and spent a year in the hospital. But if you did, your nurses were good to

you and your doctors put in their best work that day and your parents fussed over you just the right amount and your teachers helped you catch up."

"I didn't fall off a cliff," Justin muttered.

"No? Stepped on a nail and got tetanus? Nah, you would have been vaccinated. If your parents were anti-vaxxers they would have changed their tune around the time you were conceived. But I can tell you it won't have been something you picked up from being sneezed on. People don't sneeze on you. *Maybe* you could get something off a doorknob."

"I broke my leg skiing once," muttered Justin.

"Ah! And: you were not invited onto a slope you couldn't handle. Your instructor was not negligent. Your equipment was not poorly inspected. Nobody crashed into you. You just had an accident, entirely your own fault - stop me if I'm wrong."

"Where are you going with this?" Justin asked.

"I'm the same way," said Seth. "We aren't all. I think it's going turn out to be half. Mendelian genetics and all. But I knew you were in that half when I saw the house, saw the wife - she's very pretty - heard you inherited the house, heard you were a *sculptor* - is the dolphin yours?"

" *Breaching III* , yeah -"

"It's terrible. I mean, it's recognizably a dolphin, I suppose you've practiced enough, but it's not pretty, and it's not unpretty in an interesting way. But everybody except me who you've ever gotten an opinion out of - even if they don't have any reason to like you, even if they're critics - they think it's great."

"I -"

"Because I'm immune," said Seth. "Because I'm the same way."

"I don't believe this," said Justin. "You're clearly having some kind of problem, and -"

"George probably raped several hundred people," Seth said flatly. "Let's generously assume he picked up one new woman a week on average. I think it was more, but I don't have enough birthdates to corroborate that. Let's generously assume he only raped one in four and the other seventy five percent were hookers or looking for casual sex or willing to believe he was in love with them or whatever. He was running around for forty-five years, and under these assumptions that's nearly six hundred girls he straight up raped. *None of them* went to the police, and we're not talking about a man smart enough to use a fake ID and cash at the bar where he collected his lay for the night. *Not one* had a gun, or a scary boyfriend, or a protective brother. We're not talking about a crooked cop who molests arrestees or a sketchy gynecologist here, he did this in dozens of different cities with no position of power to abuse. That's how *he* used his gift. You're using yours to have a pretty wife and a nice house and a career in the arts and an easy time adopting cute orphans, I admit I like your take on it better, but it's the same damn thing."

"So - because we're genetically predisposed to, to, what are you saying this is, is it mind control -"

"It's pretty lackluster mind control. You can't use it like a comic book character. But people get out of your way, or they go your way, or just happen to be where they need to be in the mood they need to be in, the right place at the right time to make your life nice according to you. Nothing Earth-shatteringly weird. Nothing you couldn't chalk up to being a likable and talented statistical irregularity. But take all of us together... have us *interacting* , weird exceptions to patterns we take for granted... and you notice."

"You don't have any proof."

"It gets a little more overtly mind-controllingly if you push it, but you can. Order a pizza, look into your pocket and apologetically pull out a ticket stub and some lint, say, 'oh, uh, I'll look under the couch, I'm so sorry to have wasted your time, I thought I had a twenty but' - pizza guy will tell you not to worry about it. Kick a cop. He might arrest you but you'll get off. Try to adopt a project kid, one with a drug problem or something, and you'll just happen to get one who fits in really well here and doesn't try to stab you in your sleep or sell your car for meth -"

"That's horrifying," said Justin.

"Look, if you want to prove it, you have to do something that gets people to arrange themselves and behave in ways that you know for a fact they wouldn't. And you're used to them being convenient when you act as you normally do, so you have to do something you normally wouldn't, to get a real clear look. Otherwise you'll think the cop you kicked just understood that you... objected to him hassling black teenagers and appreciated the reminder, if that's normally what it would take to get you to kick a cop."

"I wouldn't kick a cop no matter what he was doing!"

"The black teenagers of the world will refrain from calling you a racist for your lack of interest in their relationships with the law. Because they're affected too. And nobody has ever called you racist in your life."

"Well," said Justin, "you, how did you - come to believe this?"

"I have more examples to look at," Seth said. "Also, there's no way I'm as good a lawyer as my track record and my hourly fee suggest, but I picked a career that's *very* malleable to what we've got. I don't even have to churn out ugly dolphins for critics to nod at."

"You don't like the sculpture, I get it. So you want me to get a vasectomy, just in case the birth control we've got doesn't work, because we're hurting people just by existing -"

"No, that's not it," said Seth. "It's a perfectly good reason and if that's what gets you to go under the knife then I won't nitpick. But that's not why I'm asking. It's because it's no good if too many people have it. And I don't mean that selfishly, I mean... Sure, George did a lot of damage, but think what happens if half the population has it. We don't work on each other - suddenly we're extracting everything we get from the other half. We can't even help it. You like the lifestyle of the pious modest charity-minded pastor's husband? Great, that doesn't hurt anyone all by itself. When your lifestyle needs support, you can get it from hundreds of millions of people who don't have our genes. No one person winds up going too far out of their way, except maybe Mary, and she seems happy, right? The kids you're doing a favor! But the more and more of us there are, the worse it gets to be a have-not."

"You seem to think you know a lot about a - a mutation we're second-generation carriers of -" Justin murmured.

"Oh, we have the most recent version. But my guess is it's happened before. Probably a few times. It's an insanely advantageous property to have! If a mutation can do this, it'll happen now and then, and then it'll spread, every time. I'm not a geneticist, I can't tell you the details, but my guesses are somebody in Europe before it started colonizing everything, maybe. Probably Genghis Khan, who promptly smeared his version all over Asia. Maybe this is how we outcompeted the Neanderthals. Even if it didn't affect the Neanderthals directly it'd rally people around one mutant leader to wipe them out whenever they got too close for comfort. I'm sure some people have fewer, or none - just didn't get a copy, or they've got damaged versions that don't work. And those people are not doing so hot. Those people are probably homeless. Because once everyone has it, it doesn't *matter*, normal non-spooky effects

dominate - unless you're someone who doesn't , and then it matters a lot."

There was a silence.

Justin said, "I'll get the vasectomy."

"Thank you. Will you help me find the rest of us - I don't think he can reasonably have knocked up most of the women he slept with, he obviously didn't care for condoms but some of them will have been wrong time of the month or on the pill. I've gotten ahold of his travel schedule from his credit card company, it's annoying to pick through but not impossible. We can find them, especially if they have the gene. They'll stand out if they have it, succeeding at anything they do that's more subjective than weightlifting."

"Yeah. You're right, this would hurt a lot of people, if it spread -"

Seth nodded. "And doesn't help anyone in the long run, just makes one more way to be below average."

"Thank you," said Justin. "For telling me."

"Of course. I'm glad I found you first. I'm not expecting everyone who wants kids to want to adopt them, and it'll go faster with more eyes on the project."

"Some of us might have them already."

"Even slowing the spread down for a few generations while science learns to identify the gene is worth our time," Seth said firmly. "A few families doing unusually well, that's nothing new, people accomplish that with money and genes for other useful traits all the time. We might miss someone. But we can make it less a Genghis Khan thing."

"Genghis Khan, huh?"

"I can't pretend I'm sure about any of this," Seth hedged. "I'm just guessing, based on when someone seems a standout. And lucky enough. Genghis Khan died old, Alexander the Great didn't - I don't know if someone being somewhere else, inclined differently, could have saved Alexander, but it's suggestive that he wasn't running on our kind of luck."

Justin nodded. "I'll need to explain to Mary."

"Why?" said Seth. "I don't think she'll believe you. You believe me because you've had the kind of charmed life I described - she wasn't there for half of it. And she won't want to know about how she was influenced to fall in love with you, who wants to hear that?" He took another jam dot. They were pretty good.

"It's a major life decision!" said Justin.

"Not if you're adopting all your kids anyway," Seth said around his cookie. "And she'll go along with it fine as long as you want her to. I suppose if you have horrible misgivings and you want an excuse to avoid it then maybe instead -"

"Please stop talking about my wife that way."

"Suit yourself. But even if you tell her about the vasectomy, and I really think you could just as well skip that, you don't have to tell her about the gene. It won't help anything, and it could hurt."

"I'll think about it," said Justin. There was another silence. "I'm going to get some milk to go with these cookies."

"Thanks," said Seth.

After Justin brought back the milk and poured some for each of them, he said, "Can you tell me about the others? Their names were - Darius and Destiny?"

"Yeah. So, George never married my mother, but he did keep coming back to her for a while, openly, after she'd had me and gotten wise about taking the pill so I don't have any full siblings, and Destiny and Darius's moms were another couple of women he was also more or less publicly involved with, so we knew each other a little. I used to babysit Darius. Destiny's between my age and yours. I don't think they have the gene, Darius dropped out of high school and hangs out with druggies and Destiny lives with her girlfriend in a shoebox and keeps turning up with bruises." He washed down the last bite of his jam dot.

"You said you had more examples."

"I do. I've met George, he was the only person I knew who moved through people and institutions like they're air the way I can. Darius has a little sister, Jasmine, and she's doing suspiciously well at everything she tries. It's not enough to get any of us whisked away by men in labcoats, sure, but it was enough to get me thinking about it, get me testing it a little -"

"Did you kick a cop?" asked Justin tiredly.

"No, but I've done the pizza one. Guy looked pleased to have a chance to help me out. I've wandered into employees-only areas prepared to pretend to be lost. Nobody called me on it. I get seats in packed restaurants and tickets to sold-out concerts. I try risky shit in court, at first well shy of what it'd take for a client to sue me for mishandling the case, later - less careful. I win. I *always win*."

"God," said Justin.

"If you say so. George was a weird pick for chosen one."

"Well, mysterious ways," said Justin. "What are they like? Darius and Destiny and Jasmine?"

"Darius is a good kid. Don't let the arrest for murder fool you, that was all over how George treated his mama, he loves his mama. Publicly acknowledged relationship doesn't mean consensual relationship. And it could only last till Jasmine found out and wanted it to stop, see, after that the effect canceled out and Darius..." Seth mimed a gunshot.

"You're very casual about that."

"I'm a criminal lawyer, I've heard worse. I'd be more formal about it in a courthouse. If I felt like being formal that day, anyway."

"I think maybe you should quit," said Justin.

"What? Why would I do that?" Seth laughed.

"You're pushing people all the time. And not over opinions on dolphins - and I might quit too, even just that is sketchy -"

"There's no 'too'. I like my job and I intend on keeping it," said Seth.

"The judges, the jurors, the defendants, their victims -"

"I'm very suited to it," said Seth. "Look, I'm just existing. We can't help how we're made. Nobody's going home with a mysterious nosebleed, nobody's lying awake having a dark night of the soul over why they thought my client was innocent when in retrospect he wasn't, and the power can just as easily bring me people who ought to get off and might not with a worse lawyer as it can bring me crooks who ought not benefit from my silver tongue, right?"

"Does it? Do you get a lot of people who were framed?" wondered Justin quietly.

"More than your average lawyer. Not all of them. Everybody deserves a defense, Justin, even if I'm getting them off on reasonable doubt or technicalities those are doubts and technicalities

that are judicially supposed to affect the trial." Seth's voice was casual, but his eyes had narrowed.

"I just think that given how the power apparently responds to our goals, we should try to maintain goals that don't put our - our wills? Our needs? in conflict with many other people in high-stakes situations. And criminal law - even contract law would be better, wouldn't it? Less likely to hurt somebody in their personal life, you know?"

"The training is not interchangeable, it's not like I've been selling sofas and can turn that sales experience into selling beer."

"Well - even so -"

"I'm not going to tank my career because you want more folks to wind up in prison, Justin."

"I'm getting a vasectomy on your say-so," Justin pointed out.

"Yeah, because you bought my argument. Because when there's a growing population with a luck advantage everybody else loses out in the short run and nobody wins in the long run. Not because I told you that your kids would get good grades in art class and be popular with their peers and might do real well if they went into law. Or into anything else, honestly, what *can't* people go where you need them to be help with?"

"Math?" said Justin. "Sports? - no, in sports I guess it could handicap competition for you -"

"And in math, sure, maybe you need to produce proofs that actually prove things, but if you can hack it as a mathematician *at all* - if you can do any math work, even if you do it slowly and it's not very... whatever it is mathematicians look for in publications... then everyone will figure that's good enough. Your students'll love you, and nobody'll notice or care if you plagiarize -"

"I'd like to think none of my children will grow up to be plagiarists, biological *or* adopted -" protested Justin.

"Sure, but you can't count on that actually sinking in, nobody's dad says 'remember, Junior, when you grow up, always steal the intellectual work of others', do they? And even if you assume they're completely on the up and up they'll have the best teachers for their learning style and the most helpful classmates and access to tutors and this won't compensate for not being able to add but it'll get them from passing calc to a job in the field if that's what they want. It all comes down to what you *want* ."

Justin sighed. "Law just seems like a bridge too far."

"What a pity we didn't meet when I was undeclared in college," said Seth, "you could have tried pushing me into development economics or something like that and I'd gaze at my navel harmlessly day in and day out."

"You're making fun of me."

"Yes. Sorry. Habit. Most people take it well, you know, I get used to it."

Justin sighed. "I probably have unbecoming habits nobody's ever called me on, too, don't I."

"You seem pretty inoffensive but the dolphin's terrible."

"You've said."

Seth laughed. "Anyway. I don't want to get too tired to drive to my hotel, so if we're agreed on the vasectomy and not having to tell Mary about it -"

"I'm still not sure about not telling Mary."

"Well, don't tell her till you're sure, then, you can't un-tell her. And run it by me first, I'm the only person you can run a train of thought by without your audience just telling you what you want to hear," Seth added.

"All right. We'll see you tomorrow morning? Breakfast is at seven," said Justin.

"Oooh, breakfast," said Seth. "I'll be there. What is it?"

"Oh, whatever Mary feels like making -"

"Whatever you're in the mood for," corrected Seth. "When Mary makes breakfast she feels like making whatever you want. Tomorrow, that's only unless I hate it, if I do then it's really up to her. But I'm not picky. What's for breakfast, Justin?"

Justin narrowed his eyes at Seth. He delayed a moment before saying, "Waffles."

"Can't wait," said Seth, and he let himself out, humming a little.

Breakfast the next morning was waffles. Seth accepted one loaded with strawberries and whipped cream. The little girls were curious about who Seth was, but Justin hurried the older one onto the school bus and sent the middle girl to pretend to read a story to the infant rather than answer the questions they weren't asking because he didn't want to answer them. Mary kissed her husband and children goodbye and went off to work.

"You think I'm doing them a favor, huh?" Justin said to Seth, moody. "The girls."

"Sure. I mean, compare it to the alternative, not to the perfect fantasy you've cooked up. You wouldn't have gotten these specific ones without the gene, you'd have gotten different kids you got

along with worse - it doesn't only nudge them around once they come home with you, it arranges that you get the right ones."

"How do you know?"

"What, when you listen to Mary talk about before she met you does she sound awful, like she had some huge personality upheaval the day she met you?"

"...no."

"And you love Mary, right?" asked Seth.

"Of course," snapped Justin.

"So these ones would be worse off, with some higher conflict family they're a worse fit for. And the ones you got instead would be only average fits, and average isn't great for adoptions, last I heard."

"You're very comfortable with all of this."

"I came around to it in my own time. You kind of got it sprung on you. I wouldn't have, only there might be hundreds of us and I can't spend six months getting to know each one before I explain why they need to avoid reproducing."

"What are you going to do," Justin said, "when you find someone who won't get sterilized? A half-sister, especially, more invasive surgery..."

"It suffices if they get an IUD. What I really dread is finding another George."

"- but what will you do," said Justin, "if you find one?"

There was a silence. "Haven't decided yet," Seth said.

"I don't like that," Justin replied. "You're a little confrontational..."

"I'm a lawyer."

"I'm well aware. But you're going to be meeting all these people with the habits you've picked up from having the gene, and confront them, and tell them that for the good of humanity they've got to go under the knife, or the - whatever implement is involved in IUDs -"

"That little interest in your marital birth control arrangements?"

"Mary's on the injected kind. Stop changing the subject."

Seth sighed. "I don't know what I'll do. It's come as a big relief that you prefer adopting. But I can't not try, can I? I can't just let our gene sweep the globe unchecked, backing whatever random act of oppressing the have-nots that first appeals to one or two of our relatives at once. What would you have me do, Justin?"

"- I don't know. I'll help you find people, I guess, and... we'll figure something out. Keep me in the loop."

"Of course I will. What else would I do?" smiled Seth.

A child - Valeria, the Colombian one, Seth surmised - required Justin's attention. Seth said, "I'm going to go have a walk around the block, all right?"

"Of course," said Justin, distracted by getting some substance out of Valeria's hair.

Seth let himself out.

A minute later, he was joined by a woman, too mixed-race to classify on sight, tall and taller with heels. She was between his and Justin's ages, draped in clothes that could double as pajamas and carrying a latte. "Hello, little brother," she said.

"Hello, Destiny," Seth said. "I thought I spotted your car earlier. What are you doing in this state?"

"Following you," she said. "Lifting fancy listening devices from Ye Olde Electronics Shoppe. Brought my whole tae kwon do class with me and scattered them around, so don't try shit."

"You know, I really didn't think you had it," said Seth.

"My idea of success looks very different from yours, little brother."

"I guess it would have to. I didn't need to know that about your kinks."

"Maybe we breed true, wouldn't that be the darnedest thing?" Destiny said thoughtfully.

"Darius," said Seth.

"Yes, all right, he's going nowhere fast. Are we sure he's really George's?"

"Positive," Seth replied levelly.

"Anyway. I want you to leave this nice man alone, little brother," said Destiny. "He's a sweetheart. And you are not."

"I haven't hurt him one bit."

"You are not overcome with a desire to meet our far-flung relations out of a sense of kinship and you are *definitely* not trying to prevent the oppression of the have-nots. Whatever you *are* doing, I want you to leave that poor bunny rabbit with that nice family out of it."

"Are you planning to stalk me through my entire search, vetting each sibling for bunnyhood before I'm allowed to associate with them?" asked Seth incredulously. "Am I to be disinvited from Jasmine's

seventh birthday party on your say-so? Anyway, I don't care what you want me to do."

"I know you don't care. I can tell Justin, though, and you'll rather *have* to care if we both want you to do something until you can explain to Jasmine how it's relevant to unicorns, princesses, and sugar," threatened Destiny. "Can't push *you* , but two against one for everybody around you, and you're all alone and didn't come nearly clean enough with Justin to get him on your side once I've had a chat with him."

"You've thought this through."

"Your problem is that you can't coordinate. Me, you, and Justin - that adds up to *you lose* . I don't know what you have in mind but I know you're a right bastard, Seth, and now that whatever it is involves prowling around, finding more of us, telling them not to have kids, feeding them lines about how much of an altruist you are, getting them on board with bits and pieces of your mystery plan... well, I don't like it, and you're gonna cut it out. Me, you, and Justin -"

"Darius," Seth said again.

"What about him?" said Destiny. "He -"

She was cut short by a bullet to the neck. Seth stopped walking. He watched her fall and choke on her blood. He put his hands over his mouth, shocked and upset body language for the benefit of any grainy camera footage that somebody's household CCTV might collect. No one was watching, but they might not have turned off their electronics, and it paid to be a little careful.

Through his fingers, he whispered, "What makes you think I can't coordinate, bitch?"

Destiny struggled to breathe. She failed, writhing on the sidewalk, reaching for him with one hand, eyes open wide and filmed with tears. She fell still. Her arm dropped.

Seth, mindful of cameras, looked left, looked right, ducked behind a rhododendron as though fearful of being shot, pulled out his phone to call the police.

The dispatcher forgot to ask his name and forgot to ask that he stay on the scene. Seth didn't volunteer. He continued around the block, whistling a bit. "Thanks, bro," he said. He wasn't wearing an earpiece, so Darius couldn't answer until Seth had reached his vantage point on the roof of the apartment building down the street. Darius had a change of clothes for him.

"I guess my idea of success looks different from hers," said Darius sourly. Seth laughed and clapped him on the back.

He went back to Justin's. He read Valeria an alphabet book six times. He took Justin and the girls out to lunch and bade them all farewell and went to catch his plane home.

He texted his campaign manager, and he smiled.

Exaltation

We have a bunk bed, but nobody sleeps in the bottom one, so we use it to hold our school things and toys and books. One of those books is about the names for groups of different kinds of animals. Like prides of lions, and murders of crows. Mother says that our grandpa, her father-in-law, gave it to her as a wedding present; this is the only nice thing we have ever heard her say about getting married, and she didn't throw the book away with all of Father's other things when he finally died. The book is called *An Exaltation of Larks*, and our body's name is Emily Lark. So we're an Exaltation.

On our tenth birthday it was a school day, so we didn't eat breakfast because they'd give us lunch at the cafeteria, and Mother slept through our alarm since we wrapped it in our old pillowcase, so Clair packed up our things very quietly and we went out to the bus stop. Emmy peeked out for a little while until the other kids from the trailer park got there and then she hid under Dawn's wing, inside the Cave. Clair went inside too to let Zix have a chance to look at his notes for our math test. He studied for the whole bus ride.

At school the homeroom teacher remembered it was our birthday but he was the only one. Palisade was out front to say thank you but she let Zix take over for the test. He didn't think any of the rest of us would do it right. Clair wanted to do some of the school some of the time because she was worried something might happen one day and we wouldn't be together to let Zix do it all forever, but Dawn always said for now it's most important to get good grades so Mother will be happy, not to spread all the learning around. Zix got A's and B's and if he let Clair take a test she got C's. And Emmy did art class where it's not too hard to get a good grade if you do the art, and then she comes inside again and paints the Cave.

Art class on our birthday was scratchboards. Emmy scratched blades of grass all along the bottom and then etched a picture of Palisade flying over it. The art teacher said, "What's that?"

"That's my imaginary friend," said Emmy. This was the safe way to talk about being an Exaltation: whoever was talking was Emily, and the other four were Emily's imaginary friends. Zix thought we'd have to think of something else when we got older but this worked in the fifth grade.

"Oh? What kind of creature is that?"

"Palisade's a griffin."

"Palisade? That's a funny name."

This was a lot of talking for Emmy and she wanted help. Palisade helped: "It's a funny story," she said, smiling. "I couldn't pick her name for the longest time and then I saw that word on the guidance counselor's vocabulary calendar and thought it was the best word. So that's her name now. Isn't that funny?"

The art teacher thought it was very funny and patted us on the shoulder and said the drawing was lovely. But Palisade had to do the rest of the drawing because Emmy didn't want to come out again. She scratched in the feathers and the fur and then Zix did social studies and then we got on the bus home.

We get off at a different stop than we get on. The bus driver probably thinks we have an aunt or something. When we were in the first grade we made a friend who's four years older than we are; her name is Sam. Some people were making fun of her lunch. We hadn't eaten much over the weekend and they were being dumb anyway, so Palisade said it smelled great and looked delicious and all those people were stupid. And then Sam gave us half of it and it was so good, and she thought we were very cute. And now after school if we go to her house to hang out with her, her mom will give us a

big plate of curry and rice and stuff. That means we can save the peanut butter for weekends and it takes longer for Mother to be upset about needing to give us grocery money.

We take a different bus from Sam because she's in high school now, so we waited for her before we went up to her house. We decided (mostly Dawn decided) that Clair should be outside for the visit because she was annoyed about being inside all day at school.

Sam waved to us and yelled, "Hi, Emily!" She had her backpack on, which looked really heavy, and some more textbooks that she was carrying.

"That's a lot of books," said Clair when Sam got closer. It was more than she'd had last week.

"Um," said Sam, "yes, it is." She let us into her house. It smelled like spices and steam from the rice cooker but we wouldn't get to eat any until Sam's mom came home from work. Clair sat on the couch in the living room. Sam hung up her backpack, and put her books under it, and sat next to us. "So how was your day?" Sam didn't know it was our birthday. We weren't all sure we liked having a birthday because some of us didn't feel ten. Emmy was ten, and so was Palisade more or less, but Dawn was infinity and Zix counted in space alien years and Clair was Sam's age.

"School was okay. How come you have extra books?"

"One of them is - one I brought from home. And it's big so I had to take some textbooks out to make room," said Sam.

"What's it about?" Clair asked.

"I'm not really sure," Sam said, "I can't get it open. I inherited it, it came in the mail from my grandfather - he died, but like I barely knew him it's all right - but it has a lock and the box *had* a key but it

doesn't actually unlock the book. I was fiddling with it between classes but I still can't get it open."

"How come your grandfather left you a locked book?" blinked Clair.

"I don't know," shrugged Sam. "There was a letter with it but I don't really get it."

"Can I see?" wondered Clair.

"It's not in English."

"Oh."

"I can only mostly read it myself in the first place. You can see the book if you want." Sam hauled it out of her backpack and put it on our lap and Clair touched the cover. It was leather with complicated circular-design carving all over it and no title, front or spine.

The book glowed, bright blinding white.

Clair yelped and stood up and it bounced off our foot and thumped to the floor before Sam could catch it. It stopped glowing, and flopped onto its front on the carpet. Like a normal book.

"I'm sorry," Clair said.

"I saw it glow too," Sam said, which was a relief. "I didn't know it would - I didn't know it would *really* do that."

Clair blinked.

"The letter said a lot of weird stuff," said Sam, gingerly picking the book up off the floor. "Do, um. Do you want to go on a magical quest."

"...What?" asked Clair.

"Okay look the book *really glowed, you saw* , right?"

Clair nodded.

"So since it did that maybe the rest of the letter wasn't totally nonsense and maybe I am supposed to send you on a magical quest. But like you're, what, nine -"

"Fo- I'm ten," corrected Clair. In the Cave the rest of us were all trying to figure out how to react. Palisade agreed with Zix that we needed to know more about magical quests and pack some sandwiches first. But Emmy wanted to go, she didn't care if we had to slay dragons or wade through swamps or go hungry every day for a month just as long as we didn't have to go home and fight over who had to be out while Mother was awake. And Dawn was on her side.

"- you're ten," Sam acknowledged, "I'm not going to *make* you go on a magical quest, but the book glowed for you, so, if you want one, I can maybe give you one?"

"Did your grandfather give people magical quests?" asked Clair.

"I guess! I don't know! I barely knew him! I don't even know why I got the book instead of one of my cousins or something."

"What are the quests *for* , like, do I get gold or have to save the world or what - if I don't go on the quest is the world going to end -"

"I don't think so?" said Sam uncertainly. "I mean, maybe gold. But I don't think the world is just hanging out being in danger all the time and if I don't give out enough quests it ends. Or that giving out quests *puts* it in danger. I *think* the letter would have been more emphatic about that."

Palisade and Zix both had a lot to say, and Emmy was whispering but we could all hear her anyway because she was in our Cave, and Dawn said we had to let Clair handle it because Clair was fronting and we couldn't second-guess her in front of Sam, not when that might distract her.

And Clair said, "I *might* want to go on a magical quest."

And we all clustered right at the mouth of the Cave, waiting for her to say:

"What do I have to do?"

Sam fumbled in her backpack for an envelope, already ragged on top from being opened. She pulled a letter out of it. Clair peeked but it wasn't even in the English *alphabet*. Sam looked at it, frowning, then said, "The book is supposed to open for you, if you try to unlock it. And it'll tell you how to do your quest, but once you open the book you have to definitely be going to do it." She muttered to herself in whatever language the letter was written in and then said, "Still pretty sure the world isn't going to end though."

Clair hesitated.

She held out our hand. And Sam gave us a key, and Clair took the book and squinted against the glow and unlocked it.

It fell open in our hands to a page in the middle, full of words in Sam's grandpa's language, with a picture of a comb - like a pretty, jewelry comb, with flowers and precious stones - at the bottom.

Sam looked over our shoulder.

"What does it say? What's my quest?" Clair asked.

"Give me a bit, I only kind of read Malayalam." We waited. Eventually Sam said, "You need more people to go on your quest,

this is for five people, it says. I don't think I'm allowed to be one of them when I gave you the quest."

"...When I find four more people," said Clair, "what do we do?"

"Then you can peel the comb out of the book and it will take you to other places and each place you go you need to find a souvenir and when you have five and bring them home, you can turn them and the comb into a magic item which you get to keep," said Sam.

Emmy wanted to go. Zix was concerned about missing school, Palisade thought we'd get ourselves killed, Clair didn't want Sam to know we're an Exaltation because she didn't want to look weird -

Dawn was on Emmy's side and we're all pretty used to doing what Dawn says because she keeps us from all fighting with each other.

Clair let Emmy pick at the edge of the outline of the comb.

"It says you need five people," said Sam.

"We're five people," said Emmy, and the comb came off the page into our hand and turned ivory and gold and all the flowers were made of sparkling gems.

"What do you mean you're -" began Sam, but Emmy pushed the book off our lap and stood up and *combed* the air in front of us, and it parted in thin stripes like the whole world was only ever made of invisible hair. There was an ocean past the world she'd combed away, and Emmy held our breath and jumped in.

The combed-away part was only open from one direction. It wasn't still there when we landed in the ocean. But Emmy had a good tight grip on the comb and we know how to swim from Father making us learn before he finally died. We were wearing a hoodie from the church charity people and it had a zipper pocket, and Emmy put the

comb in there so it wouldn't sink if she let it go, and we bobbed up and down in the sea.

"Sorry," Emmy mumbled. Usually we try not to talk to each other out loud, because it's a bad habit for pretending we're just imaginary friends, but there was nobody around.

And Clair came out front again, because she *likes* swimming. In the Cave she has a tail and for her the whole place is full of water even though the rest of us walk on the floor and have air. When she's using our body it doesn't start having a tail and she has to kick, but she still likes swimming.

There was nowhere obvious to swim to, though. Clair turned around and around in the water and there was no land and no boats.

Zix started trying to guess how long it would take us to drown, but Clair reminded him that we still had the magic comb and could probably comb our way out of the sea before it got that bad. But Palisade thought that as long as we were *already here* we should get a souvenir and see if we could finish our quest.

The only stuff around was water, though.

So Clair held our breath and went underwater. She could open our eyes underwater; she was the only one who could do that.

The sea was really clear. Clair spotted a school of little fish, and she could see the bottom, just about, although it was really dark that far down and she couldn't tell what was there. She swam down, but it was farther than it seemed and she needed to go back up for air before she could touch the sand. She took a deeper breath and tried again and went down down down and picked up a little red crab by its back so it couldn't pinch us and surfaced again.

We were not sure if the crab was a souvenir or not. Zix thought it couldn't possibly count. Palisade thought that if it couldn't the book

ought to have been clearer. Zix said that we didn't exactly let Sam *finish explaining*, did we, so how would we know if the instructions were clear.

Clair dove again and put the crab down and started looking on the sea floor for other things.

She got better at holding our breath after she'd been swimming around for a while. She found shells and seaweed and anemones and an eel that swam away from us. We'd landed in a kind of shallow part of the ocean, and she wanted to go somewhere deeper, so Zix had her pay attention to where the sun was and then swim in one direction so we could find the shallow part if we needed to.

That's how we found the city.

It wasn't a land city; we could have seen that from where we started, if it were above the water. It was an underwater city made of rock and coral and glass and whalebone and bits of driftwood, all covered in barnacles like hard white ivy.

And it was full of mermaids, and Clair almost inhaled a lungful of water when she saw them.

She kicked back up to the surface to breathe and then went under and headed straight for them.

It wasn't all "maids". There were mermen and little merkids and old merpeople. They had hair in crayon colors and they swam between the stories of their buildings without any clothes on and even if we weren't all using the same brain we would have been able to guess that Clair wanted to go be one.

The merfolk weren't expecting a visitor, but when we got close enough a couple of them, two mermaids, spotted us and swam in our direction. Up close they weren't just humans with fish tails and

funny hair colors; they had peculiar faces, too, with flattish noses and sharp chins and big eyes for seeing in the dimness underwater.

"What are you?" wondered one of the mermaids.

Clair couldn't answer because she was holding our breath.

"It looks like a person," she commented to her friend. "If a sort of deformed one. I wonder why it can't talk." The friend shrugged - sort of; she was missing an arm all the way up to the shoulder. It looked like maybe a shark got her.

Clair blew bubbles.

"Oh, it's a mammal," concluded the mermaid. "Meli, give it a dolphin globe."

Her friend had tattoos on the palm of the hand she had left, and she closed her fist over them and we could see a little red light peeking out from between her fingers. There was a loud humming sound for a moment that didn't seem to be coming from either of the mermaids and then her hand flew open and pointed the red light straight at us. And then there was a sphere of air around our head.

"There. Now can you talk?" asked the first mermaid.

"Y-yes," said Clair.

"What are you?"

"I'm -"

Clair stopped.

We're a ten year old human, sort of. Clair by herself isn't.

And it was a little hard for Clair to tell herself that she had to pretend to be normal to a couple of merpeople in an underwater city

one of whom had just obviously cast a spell.

"My name is Clair," Clair said, a little shakily. She hadn't ever said it before.

"I'm Miyana," said the mermaid. "And this is Meli. But *what* are you?"

Clair swallowed. "I'm a deformed mermaid," she said. "It's very sad. I'm supposed to have a tail like you, and blue hair, and be able to breathe underwater, but I can't. And sometimes I have to look like this for other reasons anyway."

"I don't even know how we'd fix your tail or the breathing," mused Miyana. "I could dye your hair if you want."

We had mixed feelings about that - Palisade doesn't like blue and Zix doesn't like hair. But Dawn said that Clair ought to have blue hair if she wanted it. So Clair nodded in our air bubble, and she swam after Miyana and Meli, struggling to keep up, when they beckoned for us to follow.

A lot of other merfolk looked funny at us while we were going between all the buildings and getting used to breathing with the bubble underwater. Our nose itched but Zix didn't think it was safe to try to scratch it through the spell without asking, and Miyana and Meli weren't slowing down much to let Clair catch up. Eventually they stopped at a little apartment that dangled from a tower like a weird fruit, and swam in as soon as we were there, and let us in.

"Can I scratch my nose with this spell on?" asked Clair.

"Huh, I don't know," said Miyana. "It's mostly for dolphins. Meli?"

"If the bubble breaks I can remake it," Meli said.

Clair gulped, because "don't scratch your nose" seemed like the sort of thing that would be easy to forget while Meli wasn't around, but she scratched our nose and it turned out the bubble didn't break. "Good," said Miyana, "I need to touch your head to dye your hair anyway. What kind of blue?"

Miyana's was green and Meli's dark purple, so those weren't useful points of comparison. "Like - bright, bold, primary color kind of blue?"

"I'll just let you have a look at the dyes -" Miyana had a whole box of them, it turned out. It was dark, even more in the apartment than in the open water, but Clair squinted at the blobs of color until she found one that was the right cobalt shade. And then Miyana cracked it on our head like an egg and started rubbing our head like we've seen haircut ladies at the strip mall do to people who get their hair cut there.

When she was all done she held up a mirror. Our hair was blue. Clair grinned.

"Does that help?" asked Miyana.

Clair nodded. "Um, where am I?" she asked.

"Cahae," said Miyana. (Meli had left sometime during the hair-dying process.) "You didn't know where you were? Well, do you know what you want to do while you're here?"

"I'm not sure," confessed Clair.

"Well, if you want to work for your dinner I could use someone to help me dolphin-wrangling."

Clair didn't even bother to wait for Dawn's okay before she nodded.

So Miyana led us to where she kept all her dolphins. They were penned up in a big cage, with plenty of space to move around and bubbles over their blowholes. Miyana sent Clair in with a netful of fish and a scrub sponge and we had to feed all of the dolphins exactly three fish only after they held still to be scrubbed. Meanwhile Miyana took one dolphin out of the cage and worked on training it to do tricks.

Clair washed all ten dolphins in the cage - maybe if they weren't washed they'd grow barnacles like the buildings? - and fed them, and then went to watch what Miyana was doing.

She was trying to teach the dolphin to swim in patterns she traced with her hands: if she moved her finger around in a circle she wanted the dolphin to swim in a circle, and like that. She had it on a sort of harness, and when it went in a direction it wasn't supposed to, she pulled on it to make it pay attention and showed it again how to go. Eventually it did the circle.

"Are you going to give it a treat?" asked Clair.

"No," said Miyana. "Can't overfeed them."

"But it figured out the trick."

"It gets to go up to the surface when it's done the trick a couple of times in a row."

"...Don't they get to go up sometimes? Dolphins are supposed to jump out of the water now and then. I've seen them do it." On TV, but still.

"Only when they're learning and behaving. They have their bubbles, they don't need to breach and it's inconvenient to take this many up all the time." Miyana circled her hand again. The dolphin swam in a circle.

"You could have the cage higher up."

"And then what would I use to train them?" Miyana unclipped the leash. The dolphin swam up and leapt, leaving just a shadow on the waves and then splashing down a few feet away.

"I - don't know. But I think they're supposed to go out of the water sometimes."

"Is there something wrong with your bubble? It's the same thing they get. They can breathe."

"N...no." The bubble was fine. It wasn't even stuffy.

The dolphin came back down.

"Why did it come back?" Clair asked.

"All its friends are here." She put the dolphin back in the cage and only then let it off its leash. "Every now and then one swims away, but usually they come back."

"Why do you even have all these dolphins?"

"I train some of them for shows. The one you just saw isn't very advanced, but the better trained ones do neat things. Want to see?"

Clair shook our head. "No thanks."

"Well, you've earned supper - *you* I don't have to worry about overfeeding - you eat fish, right?"

"Yes."

Miyana gave us dinner, which was raw fish pieces wrapped in seaweed and pretty tasty. But none of us could stop thinking about the dolphins stuck in a cage all the time. They could breathe, but they couldn't *jump*, and dolphins were supposed to be able to jump.

After dinner Miyana didn't have anything in particular for us to do, and it seemed like merpeople just slept floating wherever they happened to find convenient instead of having actual beds, so we didn't need to worry about finding a place to sleep. She just closed her eyes after eating and floated right there in her dining room.

We slept too, but woke up before Miyana did. We let ourselves out of her place and went swimming through the city. We went by the dolphin cage again.

The dolphins were swimming around, mostly. Some of them were sleeping. One of them was pregnant, we'd noticed that when Clair was scrubbing them. As soon as Miyana let one of them go it would jump, and then it would come back to its friends. Zix wondered if the dolphins were healthy if they didn't get as much exercise as they wanted. The cage looked huge, but it wasn't actually, not for that many animals that size.

Emmy was thinking about the baby one about to be born, who wouldn't be allowed to go up to the surface until it was old enough to learn tricks. How long would that take? Palisade thought the dolphins ought to just swim away when they were let go, or yank their leashes away without waiting to be freed, friends or no friends; why wouldn't they, were they stupid, didn't they realize that was why they were kept like that to begin with? Dawn wondered if the way dolphins jumped was like flying -

The cage netting was too fine for dolphins to get through. When the baby one was born it would have to stay with its mother even if it could go between the strings.

But we're little. We could fit.

Clair picked up the scrubber sponge, and squeezed in with the dolphins. She put the sponge in our pocket and pulled out the comb.

"I need another sea," she told the comb. "For the dolphins. It has to have water that's the right temperature, and fish for them to eat, and other dolphins for them to make friends with if this isn't enough dolphins for them to be happy, and it has to have air on top of it for them to jump in. Okay?"

The comb glinted a little in the low light. The sun was setting; we could barely see the dolphins right in front of us.

"Okay," Clair said to the comb, and she combed the sea away.

And there was another sea, greener, daylight, and she chased all the dolphins through into it and then followed after.

The water on the other side was shallow enough to stand in. Clair helped the dolphins who'd wound up kind of stuck get into the deeper water, and then waded onto the shore. There was an enormous cliff face after just a few feet of beach. Clair wondered if there were more mermaids out there, if our bubble would hold. She waded back out and put our face in the water. We got wet. So the bubble didn't stay, oh well. Zix hoped the dolphins remembered how to surface to breathe but figured they probably did and if they didn't the other dolphins in the new ocean would teach them.

Clair pulled around some of our hair to look at, though, and it was still blue. We felt kind of bad about taking Miyana's hair dye and dinner and then stealing all her dolphins. But only kind of.

There really wasn't a lot of beach. Clair walked up and down it, thinking about the mermaids and their city and how they moved their fish tails.

Then she looked up and we saw the griffin and Palisade said it was *her turn* and Dawn backed her up.

"HEY," Palisade yelled to the griffin. "HEY, CAN I GET A LIFT?"

The griffin looked down at us and swooped lower. Palisade was momentarily scared that they would decide we were bite-sized, decided that if she had to she'd throw sand in their eyes and dive into the sea to get away -

The griffin just landed on the sand, lion hindpaws first, eagle foreclaws next, folded their wings, peered at us. "Where'd you come from?" It sounded like a boy griffin.

"The sea," said Palisade.

"You don't look like a fish."

"I'm not a fish," said Palisade. "I'm a griffin like you but I'm under a curse that makes me look like this. It means I can't fly. Can you take me someplace that won't go underwater at high tide?"

"I suppose. Have you got armor on under all that cloth?" asked the griffin. "You look pretty fragile, my claws might go right through you."

"Maybe I could just sit on your back," suggested Palisade.

"If you really want," he said. So Palisade sat on him, and he took off and she tried not to pull out any of his feathers holding on. "How'd you get cursed?"

"It runs in my family," said Palisade. "What's your name? I'm Palisade."

"Nice name," said the griffin. "I'm Vanguard."

"Nice name," echoed Palisade. "Are there a lot of other griffins here?"

"A whole company," said Vanguard. "You know, I think the captain could find a use for you, you're little and two-legged -"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, there's a nest of goblins a ways inland. We were going to besiege them but maybe you can help get it over with quicker. You don't have claws hiding in those digits of yours, do you?"

"...No."

"Some curse. Maybe we have something you can use around. Not being able to fly is one thing but if you haven't got claws how can you call yourself a griffin?"

"I, um." Palisade isn't usually at a loss for words.

"Yeah, yeah, curse, but goblins haven't got claws and they manage to bloody us often enough. Not as often as we get them back, though!" Vanguard was coasting lower and we could see a bunch of griffins set up around eight campfires, and a big square tent decorated in brown and gold. Palisade had a look at Vanguard's eagle feet. They did sort of have thumbs.

Vanguard landed. Palisade slipped off his back. It seemed like his question about how she could call herself a griffin was rhetorical, but he still called out, "Found a cursed griffin from the sea, boys and girls! Name of Palisade! Going to take her to the captain for outfitting!"

"Did you find everything else you meant to find?" asked another griffin from her position at the mouth of the tent.

"Yes ma'am," said Vanguard. "I saw Palisade here when I was about to double back. Are Scout and Rampart back yet?"

"Scout is. Go on in," said the guard griffin, and she nodded Vanguard and us into the tent.

Inside there was a table and a map on the table, and little figures of wood on the map, and three more griffins looking severely at these things. It was sort of hard to tell them all apart; they were slightly different colors and one of them had a scar on their eye and they were wearing decorations, but it was still all raptor faces. "Captain Kite!" said Vanguard, and the scar-eyed one looked up. "I found this cursed griffin on the shore. Name of Palisade. She hasn't got any claws."

"Well, I'm sure we can find her something," said the captain. "Assuming she signs on. You didn't forget that step, did you, Vanguard?"

"Uh. I sort of assumed, sir. She says she's a griffin."

"I am," added Palisade. "I just don't have any claws, it might - make me less useful."

Kite stalked around the table to have a closer look at us. "But you do have a significant infiltrative advantage. And I'm sure we have something sharp that isn't attached to a soldier. What do you say, do you want to join the Company Counterscarp?"

Palisade swallowed. But Palisade isn't usually at a loss for words. "I have some other things I have to do, soon. But if you really need the help with the goblins I could do a little temporary work for you if you help me with the claws situation."

Captain Kite nodded at one of the other griffins and said, "Artillery, find her something useful. A selection, ideally." And when Artillery left he continued, "We could use you for a stealth mission. You'd look a lot like a goblin with a suitable disguise and you could bring us intel."

Palisade nodded. "I know all about the undesirability of goblins as neighbors," from storybooks, "but can I ask why this nest and why now?"

"Ah, have a look here," said Kite, gesturing at the map. "See, they've built here, and they're controlling these fields, which they've turned over to agriculture. It's divided up the usual range of the herd animals and if that goes on there will be smaller, less robust herds in more cramped quarters and we'll have a hard time feeding ourselves on an ongoing basis."

"I see," said Palisade, looking over the map. "So you want to know - whether the goblins have any back exits, or anything, so you can surround them?"

"Exactly," said Kite.

"Then what?" asked Palisade.

"Round 'em up, drive them off the cliffs into the sea or shred them depending on how much resistance we get," said Kite.

We weren't sure if griffins used to people with beaks would be able to read our face but Palisade didn't wince even so. "Can't just drive them off to wherever they used to live?" she wondered, looking at our nails. "Seems like it'd be less trouble."

"Nah. Just encourages 'em to come back in greater numbers," said Kite.

"If I go in," said Palisade, "and they notice I'm not a goblin, well, I'm not actually trained for combat missions. What with not having claws."

And we didn't even know anything about these goblins - or these griffins - and didn't especially want to fight in their war, but Palisade wanted her claws very much. If you'd asked her before she would have said wings, but apparently real griffins thought the important thing was claws, so she had to have those.

"I think you'll pass all right if we paint you green," said Captain Kite. "And you scrunch down a little; they're mostly shorter than you. I'd sooner see you with claws anyhow - ah, thank you, Artillery," Kite said as the tent flap was pushed aside and Artillery returned with a box dragged by a hind foot.

Palisade looked into the box. There were knives - black glass ones, two of those, and one that looked like a carved bone. There was a stone spiked hammer and a mace and a couple things we didn't recognize - "What's that?"

"A sai," said Artillery.

"What?" asked another griffin who'd been glaring at the map.

"Not you, Sai."

"What about that one?"

"A chakram."

"What's this?"

"I thought you'd like that one!" Artillery said cheerfully. "That's proper claws, isn't it?"

It was like a metal glove, sort of, we could see how it'd fit over a hand. And it had blades, black glass ones, protruding out from the knuckles, wicked and sharp and just right. Palisade put it on, and gave our arm a swing through the air.

"I like it," she grinned.

"All these were taken off goblins in the first place, so it won't look out of place if you use them," Captain Kite said. "Ready to get painted?"

"Sure am, Captain," said Palisade, more cheerfully than we felt.

Palisade walked where the griffins directed her and helped one named Banner cover all of our skin in green dye. The griffins' claws were pretty nimble but we still didn't want them trying to paint around our eyes like that. We kept the blue hair - if goblins didn't have blue hair, the griffins didn't seem to think it was a big deal.

And then Vanguard gave us a lift to a known goblin burrow entrance, circled over it once to point it out to us from the air, and landed a quarter mile off to let us approach on foot. "You just slip right in there - gosh, you're so little, it keeps surprising me - you just slip right in there, and find out where the other entrances are, and come back and tell us," he said. "Understand?"

"Yes sir," Palisade replied. "Will you wait here so I don't have to walk all the way back? I might get lost."

"Gosh. I didn't think of that part. Uh, I suppose I can, sure," said Vanguard, "as long as you don't take too long. I want to be back in time for the dinner bell."

"Thanks!" said Palisade. "If I'm not back before then, assume I died!"

"Okay!" said Vanguard, and he settled down comfortably on the ground to wait, and Palisade marched to the goblin burrow.

Dawn called a vote. None of us wanted to actually go infiltrate goblins for the griffins. The griffins were griffins, sure, and they'd been nice to us, and we wanted them to have good hunting grounds or whatever it was they'd been explaining about, but roping a ten-year-old into their war was kind of weird.

Palisade ignored the vote. She wanted to go in and look around, even if she changed her mind about reporting back later. And if she didn't report back, Vanguard would figure we were dead, and that would be that. She thought that there might be a good reason the goblins and the griffins were fighting besides just arguing over who

got to use the land. Maybe goblins were actually horrible and we'd be more interested in helping once we met some, or maybe they were great and we'd want to warn them about the griffins.

Nobody felt strongly enough about it to actually push Palisade out of the way on her turn, and the rest of us hung back while she tromped toward the burrow and looked inside.

It was dark in there, and we couldn't tell if the goblins went in by sliding - it was at about the right angle to be a slide - or by climbing backward, or by climbing forward, or if there were actually stairs a few feet down into the hole. Palisade eventually chose to attempt to slide, and scooted down the dirt bottom of the tunnel a bit, and before she'd made up her mind to flip over and crawl backward she'd tumbled out into a bigger cavern.

It was dim but not fully dark here; it was lit by mushrooms on the cavern walls that glowed pale green. Palisade held still, standing at the bottom of the burrow entrance, until our eyes adjusted; and then she picked a direction and started walking.

We didn't see any goblins. We didn't hear any goblins. It looked like goblins had lived here, before, we found a trash pile and a lot of tunnels lined with glowing mushrooms and little caves off to the sides of the tunnels with weird goblin furniture in them made of bones and wood and rocks, but there weren't any goblins, anywhere. We didn't have a watch, we just had to guess how long it had been, but by the time we were really hungry and our feet were starting to hurt from walking so much and Zix wasn't sure he'd be able to find our exit again unless we turned around right away, we still hadn't run into one single goblin, not even a dead one.

We made our way back to the bottom of the tunnel hole and on our way there we noticed a room we hadn't checked before. We were pretty sure by now that there were no goblins in this entire tunnel system, but just in case, we peeked, and we found a map, there. It

was too hard to read in the dark - we could see the walls and the floor and our own feet, but not read. Palisade took the map and rolled it up and tucked it under our arm, and hauled it up the cave burrow, even though it made it a lot harder to crawl up. It wouldn't fit in our pocket even if the sponge wasn't taking up half the space in it.

Vanguard was still waiting, though he'd gotten up and started pacing back and forth while we'd been looking. "Palisade! Hello!" he said, when we got within shouting distance. "How'd it go? You don't look like you're bleeding, that's good!"

"I'm fine!" said Palisade. "But the thing is, there weren't any goblins home. Do you think they might all be out farming or something right now?"

"I wouldn't think so," mused Vanguard. "Even if a lot of them were, there'd probably be baby goblins they'd have to leave behind, right? And I didn't see any on their farms when we were flying, did you?"

"I think maybe you can see better than I can with my curse and all," Palisade said. "So you'd know better than I would. Anyway, I found this," she waved the map, "I wanna get a better look at it in the light -" And she unrolled it.

Vanguard didn't seem very interested. "I didn't know goblins could write," he remarked. "Fancy that."

The goblins hadn't written; they'd just drawn. It was a map of the land we were standing on, and then a bunch of lines around the coast, like it was a lot of different shapes all at the same time.

Palisade showed the map to Vanguard. "Do you understand this?" she asked him.

He peered at it. "Looks kind of like a map, except it's got too many lines for the shore," he said.

"Yeah, that's what I thought too. Does that mean something?"

"I didn't even know goblins had maps!" Vanguard said. "I don't know what it'd mean if those lines were on one of ours, either. Let's go back and show the captain."

So Palisade climbed on his back and he flew us back to the camp. Captain Kite took a minute to come out and see us and take Palisade's report - she figured there was no harm in delivering it, since there were no goblins to surround - and then she showed him the map.

It was pretty hard to tell when a griffin was frowning, but we thought Kite was, as he looked seriously at the map. "Well," he says. "This might be why they've all run off, mightn't it?"

"Oh?" said Palisade.

"Yes, see, this looks a bit like they think the peninsula's going to collapse," he said, "from an earthquake or something. Isn't that superstitious? You can't predict earthquakes."

"Not even if you live underground? And are goblins?" asked Palisade.

"Of course not. But that means they won't give us any trouble, so that's all to the good. Good recon work, Palisade. You're sure you don't want to stay on with the company? There might be more work for a little biped, sooner or later."

"No, but thanks very much," said Palisade. "Can I keep the claws? I really like them."

"Of course," said Captain Kite. "All yours, since I assume you don't have a local bank account."

Griffins with bank accounts was a very odd idea for all of us. "That's right," said Palisade cheerfully anyway. "Thanks a bunch, Captain."

And she walked us away from the camp and pulled out the comb.

The next world wasn't a world, it was a building. A metal and plastic building that smelled stale and strange, like the inside of a schoolbus, or a hospital. There were metal doors, all along the corridor on both sides, and the hall curved in front of and behind us so we couldn't see where it led without walking down it.

We walked, Emmy in front because we didn't know whose turn it was yet without knowing where we were and it might be her. Emmy took slow careful steps down the hallway, running our fingertips along the wall, and listened for anything that might make a sound. There was a low humming noise like an engine, and a draft like the whole place was air conditioned. We didn't see any windows or signs, unless the designs all around the archways of the doors were signs, which they could be. But everyone we'd met could talk to us so far. So they might have just been for pretty.

Eventually we heard footsteps coming from the other direction. Emmy hid in the Cave and Palisade came back out - it wasn't going to be her turn twice, we were sure, because that didn't seem fair or a good way to make a quest for five people, but she didn't mind being in front and she was better at pretending she knew what she was doing than Clair or Zix. Palisade folded our hands behind our back and marched right down the middle of the hallway, curving left along with it, till we met the person who owned the footsteps.

We hadn't noticed by listening that the footsteps were strange, but we saw right away: the person had three feet. We were pretty sure it was a person because it was wearing clothes, snug ones in bright red with stripes, over itself. It had one arm, with a hand, and looked a bit like maybe it was related to things with four legs but instead of turning two legs into hands it had only done one. It was startled to see us. Well, we thought it was startled; it took a step back. It was even harder to tell what its face was doing than with the griffins; it

had four eyes and no mouth, at least not on its face, unless one of the nostrils was secretly a mouth.

It managed to talk anyway, though - "How did you get aboard?"

"How do you think?" said Palisade, but Zix was wondering if actually this was his turn. He didn't look like this species of alien, though, Zix was more human-shaped and blue and had antenna things on his head. So he didn't push Palisade out of the way.

"Well, you're not authorized to be here, anyway," said the alien, and it tugged a piece of fringe that was dangling from its sleeve, and the lights in the corridor all went bright white - they'd been teal before - and an alarm that sounded like an ice cream truck crossed with a crow cawing started up.

Palisade turned around and ran.

The alien chased us, but it wasn't very fast; it walked with a glump-glump-glump noise and didn't seem to be able to go any faster than that. We went around the curve and soon couldn't see it if Palisade looked behind us. She kept running, past doors and doors and doors, trying to shut out the sound of the alarm and squinting our eyes against the bright light.

The curve came to a dead end, but there was a ladder. She threw us against it and climbed up, guessing that it would be harder for a one-armed alien to go up than it was for us. She skipped the first landing, and ducked into the hallway that branched off the second instead, and jogged down the curve of that one, checking in our pocket for the sponge and the claws. There were two doors, one on either side, spaced farther apart than in the first hallway, and then there was an open doorway without any door in it - just a shiny transparent wall of something-ness. She stopped.

Zix shoved her out of the way, because behind the wall was his kind of alien.

The alien in the cell was about our height and blue and smooth and had two antennae coming out of his head, from a few inches above where eyebrows would be if he had any. He was wearing a grey uniform, with red and brown triangles around all the hems, and a seven pointed star holding it closed at his throat. He was startled to see us. We still had blue hair and we were painted green and our clothes were a mess from having swum in the ocean and climbed around a goblin burrow in the dark. Clair was very annoyed about how gross we must have looked, but the alien didn't mention anything about that, he just said, "What are you?"

"I'm one of you," Zix said, "only I've been having a very strange time of it recently."

"Are you here to break me out?" asked the alien.

"Yes," said Zix, barely hesitating. This wasn't, he thought, like not wanting to get between the griffins and the goblins; this was someone who was being kept prisoner, and wanted to escape, not a battle. "Do you know how this is opened?"

"They've been using the keypad over there," the alien said. "I can't see it from inside, but the tones sound like -" And he crooned a few notes.

Zix tried numbers until he found the ones that made those notes, made a guess and pressed the big red button to clear out the ones he'd pushed, and put in the ones that made that tune. The force field disappeared, leaving clear air between us and the alien.

"What's your name?" the alien asked, rushing out and running down the corridor. Zix followed him.

"Zix. Yours?"

"Kozoq. It's an honor to meet you, Zix."

"You know the way out?"

"The escape pods should be this way, and we can retune the distress signal to our frequencies. Someone'll pick us up."

Kozoq found the bay of escape pods where he expected them, and they weren't hard to open. The alarm was still squawking at us but when we closed the pod it was muffled and when Zix pulled the cord that sent us shooting away from the ship into space it silenced.

The pod was cramped; there was room for both of us, but we couldn't sit down. We weren't exactly standing, since it didn't have gravity like the ship did; we floated, face to face with a Zix-sort-of-person our size. Zix was so excited and wasn't sure how to ask any of his questions - how could he ask what the species was *called*, how they lived, shouldn't he already know? How could he ask what the planet was like, how long its years and what color its sky, shouldn't he have grown up there? Zix didn't know anything he ought to have known about what kind of person he was and it was embarrassing. He was quiet.

Kozoq said, "How did you find me?"

"I didn't know you were there," Zix said. "I was on the ship on an unrelated mission." Zix liked to watch a lot of TV with spaceships in it that wasn't really for kids and he could talk like it sometimes. He looked up the words afterwards if we didn't know them already. "But rescuing you took precedence."

"Well, you have my eternal gratitude," replied Kozoq. "And I'll make sure you have the Assembly's too, when we reach Hixaz. There'll be a medal in it for you, I'm sure, and a promotion. And a stay in the medbay to fix whatever happened to your antennae and your skin and..." There were too many other things to list; our body had too many fingers for Zix, and hair, and the ears were wrong, and the nose was wrong, and the teeth were wrong, and now that he was looking at a real live version of a... Hixazian?... instead of just

imagining himself a shape in the mirror in the Cave, he could see there were a lot of other things wrong, too, the shape of our head and the color of our eyes and the texture of our lips and the angles of our bones. We knew Zix was a boy, but weren't sure whether that meant anything specific for Hixazians that we didn't have, either. "And whatever else has been troubling you," Kozoq finished.

"Thank you," said Zix.

Kozoq looked offended. "It's only what you're entitled to for performing a rescue on an enemy ship!"

"- I, uh," said Zix. "Sorry."

This seemed to make it worse. "I owe you my life, you don't have to apologize to me."

Zix clammed up. Clearly there were subtleties of politeness that he had not been exposed to growing up on Earth.

"May I ask you something?" Kozoq said.

"Of course," said Zix, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

"How did whatever happened to you happen? You look like you've spent a year in a bioengineering vat, or worse, but you're running missions instead of recuperating back home? Are you even a soldier?"

"I'm not," Zix admitted. "I'm just a person. I haven't been to Hixaz in - in ten years." He knew the years were wrong, he didn't know how long exactly Hixazian years were, but he didn't know if they were longer or shorter, he'd always felt his age was just not exactly the body's age without knowing how so. Still, since he could be too high or too low with that number it seemed like a reasonable estimate, not like a lie, right? "I miss it very much."

"Ten years? Then where have you been?" asked Kozoq. "You don't look that old - but of course you've been in a vat, I apologize -"

"I've been on a different planet masquerading as one of the locals and learning things in their schools," Zix said. "It's been very difficult and lonely and I'm not sure I'll fit in very well back home."

This didn't seem to land well with Kozoq either. "Hopefully you have - family members to whom you can explain such emotional matters," he said stiffly.

Zix didn't say anything. Half the things he said seemed to make it worse. He wasn't sure if we counted as family members or something else, in general or according to whatever rule of manners Kozoq was using.

"At any rate, I think we're clear enough of the enemy ship to start tuning the distress signal now," Kozoq said briskly, and he squirmed around us in the tight space of the escape pod to start working on that. Zix watched over his shoulder, trying not to ask more questions and upset Kozoq further by not knowing enough already, although he was so curious he was burning up with it. Kozoq fiddled with dials and buttons and watched lights and listened to static, and finally was satisfied with his work and closed the panel.

We waited in the escape pod together for more than an hour, and Zix couldn't think of anything to say that he was sure was all right, so we did it silently, floating, staring at each other. And then finally a Hixazian ship picked up the distress signal, and tractor-beamed us into their fighter bay, and let us out of the pod.

All the Hixazians were around our height, some a little shorter, some a little taller. They were all blue and smooth and antennae'd and all wearing uniforms like Kozoq's. They were confused by our hair and our green paint and our ratty hoodie and jeans and sneakers and offered us one of their uniforms.

The uniforms didn't have pockets for the comb and sponge and claws, so Zix had to turn them down. They seemed to find that very upsetting, and apologized a lot for offering, and muttered to each other that they should have known better than to suggest it, and it was so embarrassing Zix almost tried to pull someone else front, Palisade maybe, but it was his turn, we knew that now.

"Maybe I could just change into the uniform pants," Zix tried, because we were using our hoodie pocket and not our jeans pockets, but the Hixazian who'd offered the uniform said no, it had to be a whole uniform or nothing, and did he mention he was sorry to have presumed upon Zix's choice of outfit, of course that was wholly his discretion, he didn't need to placate them with partial acceptances if the offer was not to his liking.

Zix sat awkwardly on the command deck in an observation chair near a display we couldn't understand, not saying anything because he had no idea what was safe to say. The ship flew toward Hixaz, which rose huge and blue and beautiful in the viewscreen. It had prettily crenellated continents and white clouds and red deserts and wide seas and a band of colorful rings around it. Zix was disappointed that it didn't look familiar at all.

We landed in a huge spaceport, all shiny silver and glossy black and gleaming white, like someone scrubbed and polished every inch of it twice a day. The Hixazian uniform shoes didn't seem to leave footprints; Zix cringed as he followed Kozoq out of the ship onto the clean floor and failed not to mark it up.

There were offices, each one with the side toward the concourse open, even the ones that were six stories up, gridding a whole wall. Some were at ground level, some opened to elevated, guardrailed paths you could reach on antigravity platforms. Kozoq showed Zix to an elevator and went up to the third story and brought us to an office with more Hixazians, whose uniform stars only had three points. They were bustling around with computers and computery

sorts of devices that weren't exactly computers; everything beeped and sometimes a machine voice spoke and said a number or a name. Zix squinted under the bright light while Kozoq explained to a person behind a desk that he'd been rescued from an enemy ship and how, and told Zix to explain where he'd come from.

Zix repeated his simplified story about having been impersonating another species on their world and attending school there, and the person behind the desk typed it up and didn't ask too many questions, and said we could have a hotel room on the Assembly's dime and a meeting with the Assembly the following morning. Then he gave us directions to the subway station so we could get to our hotel. Zix had to ask him to repeat the directions and explain all about how to get on the subway until we were pretty sure we could remember everything between us.

We got lost, and had to ask directions again, which seemed to really upset the Hixazian we asked, but he told us how to get back on our route anyway. Eventually we were on the right subway platform and got on the wrong train and had to go back the other way to get on the right one, and we missed our stop and just walked to the hotel instead of turning around on the subway again. The streets were wide and full of Hixazians driving fast on hover bikes, antennae sticking out of their helmets.

At the hotel they took Zix's name and then said they'd been expecting him and the person behind the reception desk made to shake our hand, but instead of shaking it, he stabbed us in the skin between our thumb and forefinger with a little device, and injected us with a tiny glowing red thing. "That's your temporary ident chip!" he said, like he hadn't just stabbed us. "You can have it replaced with a permanent one when you see the Assembly. In the meantime, that will get you to your apartment and you can order room service with it."

" *Ow!*" exclaimed Zix, since he had just *stabbed us* . "Why didn't you warn me first?"

"Warn you?" blinked the receptionist. "About - room service?"

"About sticking that chip in my hand!" Zix shouted. "That hurt!"

"I - sir, please calm down, this is a public place," said the receptionist.

"That's not the problem here!" said Zix. "The problem is that you took my hand and stabbed something into it without asking!"

"That's how ident chips work," said the receptionist. "If you're having a bad reaction to the sensation that seems like your own problem, it's really none of my business how -"

"You're the one who did it!" said Zix.

"Sir, please, if you're having an emotional problem perhaps you could go to your room," said the receptionist through gritted teeth.

"Stop calling me sir and stop acting like you ought to make sense to me, I'm - I'm ten!"

"I don't see what your advanced age has to do with anything."

"It's not an advanced age, I mean ten Earth years -"

"Sir -"

Zix stomped toward the elevator and waved our stinging hand around until it took us toward the room. It occurred to us that we hadn't seen any kids, anywhere, even when we'd left the spaceport all full of uniformed soldiers. There had to be kids, they had to come from somewhere, Zix was a kid so obviously they didn't start out grown up, but they were all hidden away somehow, maybe until they learned all the stupid rules this planet had about when to

apologize and how to act when people stabbed you. And then they could pop out and behave politely, Hixaz style, without ever having to have an emotion in public.

Palisade and Emmy wanted to comb to a new world right away. Clair pointed out that we didn't know if the next world would have food or not, and the griffins hadn't fed us. Zix ordered room service and didn't thank the person who brought it to our room and ate blue jelly spheres that tasted like fish and red bread that tasted like juice until we were full, and *then* combed away the air in the hotel room. The Assembly could just miss out on getting to meet him.

The next world was dim with fog, and the air felt soft and damp and warm like the breeze from a dryer vent. The ground squashed under our feet.

We saw an angel lying on the softness, far enough away that we couldn't see if it was a boy angel (if there was such a thing) or a girl one, and we knew it was Dawn's turn.

Dawn doesn't like to come out front, though, she belongs in the Cave, looking after the rest of us. So Emmy went out front for her, because she hadn't had a turn yet. If it turned out Dawn needed to do it she could try, but maybe Dawn could have her turn from inside the Cave and the rest of us could handle being out front.

Emmy took slow, careful steps toward the angel. As we got closer we could see more detail: brown hair, golden-brown skin, tawny wings. It was a girl angel, it turned out, and she was draped in white cloth that seemed almost more like a blanket than like clothes; she looked asleep, long eyelashes closed against her cheeks. Emmy walked right up to where the angel's feet were crossed on the ground and then she blinked up at us.

"Hello," the angel yawned.

"Hi," Emmy whispered.

"You look like you've had a very long day," said the angel.

"Yes," said Emmy, "more than a day, even," since we'd slept overnight in the ocean with the mermaids.

"Would you like to lie down and get some rest? There are spare blankets, just around the corner." We hadn't been able to make out any corners before but now that we were closer to the angel we could see that there was furniture made of the same soft stuff as the ground - shelves, and you could call what she was lying on a mattress if you were generous with the word. And the substance of the ground reached up into the vague sky or ceiling in the occasional column or wall; the space was too open to be a burrow like the goblins and too irregular to be a ship like the aliens', it was more like a soft humid landscape with rock formations that happened to be squashy.

Emmy went around the corner, Dawn as close to coming out of the Cave as she ever got. Dawn told Emmy which blanket to choose, a pink one with square waffly texture to it, and Emmy got it down for her and brought it back to the angel.

"What's your name?" Emmy whispered, when Dawn wanted to know. It seemed polite to whisper to someone who'd just woken.

"Ciel," yawned the angel.

"I'm Dawn," said Emmy; she wasn't, but she was speaking *for* Dawn, so that was all right.

"Make yourself comfortable, Dawn." And Ciel closed her eyes again.

Emmy lay down and got under the pink waffly blanket. She was a little restless, rolling over and eventually getting up to see if there were pillows. There were; Dawn picked one of those too and Emmy

got back onto the mattress-landscape-feature. But we still couldn't get comfortable. We weren't really tired. We didn't have much sense of time, but we thought it was maybe midafternoon, or just after dinner, not bedtime yet.

Emmy rolled onto our back and looked up. There was nothing to see. It was just fog and vague color all the way up. Could the angels fly up into that? Was it solid at ceiling height? We didn't know. Dawn thought it had to be possible to fly, because angels had wings, didn't they, but Ciel wasn't flying and didn't look like she'd be inclined, she was just lying on the ground, too delicate to snore but obviously asleep again despite all our tossing and turning.

Dawn and Emmy conferred a little. Dawn wanted to wait and see if we fell asleep, or if Ciel woke up. The rest of us wanted to wander, but it was Dawn's turn.

We waited.

Eventually even Dawn didn't think we were going to manage to take a nap and admitted we had no idea how long Ciel was going to be asleep. Emmy got up and wove through the pillars and rises of the angelworldly land; our feet didn't make a sound against the squashy surface.

We heard the next angel before we saw her. Harp music, chords plucked out slowly and dreamily, just at the edge of earshot. Emmy almost ran toward it, but it was Dawn's turn and she was helping Dawn, and Dawn wanted to walk, slowly, it seemed to her the way the place was formed was for walking and not running. Well, it was ideally for flying, but we didn't have wings. It was starting to look like we were not going to come out of our quest with any more exciting add-ons than blue hair, and that we could have gotten if we'd asked Sam to get us dye for our birthday, if we'd told her when our birthday was.

The harpist came into view. She was a dark angel with black wings and black skin and black hair, and she smiled at us when we approached. She strummed another chord and then put her hands flat on the strings so they stopped. "Hello there."

"Hello," Emmy said, politely and softly just like Dawn asked her to. "I'm Dawn."

"It's nice to meet you, Dawn. Have a seat." Some of the squashiness was shaped so you could sit on it, sort of bench-y, and we sat next to the angel on her bench. "I'm Alto."

Emmy almost said "hi Alto" even though she'd already said hello, but Dawn reminded her not to repeat ourselves. "Your music is pretty," Emmy said instead.

"Why, thank you. Would you like to try?"

Dawn wanted to. Emmy didn't; Clair came out to do it for us, and reached for the harp strings, and strummed. It didn't sound as good when we did it.

"That's not bad for a first try. You have as long as you need to get better," said Alto.

"I'm not going to stay here that long," said Clair, which was not how Dawn had wanted to put it, "but maybe I can get lessons someday at home or something," which was.

"Here," said Alto, getting up and opening a lid in a different part of the bench, "I think I have a small lap harp, somewhere." She rummaged, taking ages to go through every thing carefully and slowly, till she found a wooden trapezoid with strings and offered it to Clair.

Clair took it and laid it on our lap and strummed that, too. It sounded like notes, but not especially good ones, still. Alto took our

hand and showed us how to position our fingers. Dawn was leaning further and further out of the Cave while Clair learned to play a scale.

Alto had only been teaching us for about ten minutes when she yawned and said she was going to take a nap. "But we've barely started," Clair said on Dawn's behalf.

"Oh, Dawn, darling, I understand, but I've been up for hours. It's about time I got some sleep. You can nap too and then the time will just fly by," said Alto.

"...Maybe I'll go explore some more and come back later when you're awake," said Clair. Dawn had wanted to try to nap again, to be polite, but we'd already done that, not very long ago, and Clair knew we weren't tired and she wasn't going to front for Dawn if Dawn made her do things that pointless. Dawn didn't want to try to nap more than she wanted to stay in the Cave.

"You look pretty tired to me," said Alto.

"I'm not really," said Clair. "I've just had a lot going on."

"Isn't that a good reason to take a break?"

"Maybe later."

"You might not be able to find your way back here if you wander off."

"I don't have to go far," said Clair, beginning to be annoyed. It was one thing for people to worry about us getting lost when we were back on Earth and could go six stops too far on the bus and get turned around because the streets and avenues were both numbered and there were diagonal roads named differently, but Alto's place with the harp wasn't even someplace we really had to be able to come back to. "I'm not - overexerting myself, or anything."

"It looks like it to me," said Alto, and really, it wasn't any of her business.

Clair stood there for a moment, waiting for Dawn to make up her mind, and Dawn finally decided that we could move on and look for a more alert angel, even if the harp was lovely. Clair set the lap harp down and tromped off and Alto didn't even try to stop us.

We walked until our ankles hurt from taking odd steps on the spongy ground; Clair yielded to Emmy again, then to Palisade, as the world proved more and more extensively that it was very boring. We found another angel, napping, and figured she wouldn't mind if we sat down with her and waited for our feet to feel better, based on the other two angels we'd met.

This was still pretty boring, though, and eventually we started looking through this angel's stuff. She had pillows and blankets and a glockenspiel, which Emmy played for a bit, quietly going up and down the scale so she wouldn't wake the angel. Then she found a box of halos, in all kinds of colors, sparkly silver ones and bright gold ones and pearly white ones and one in flickering electric pink and one in sunny orange and one that shifted while we watched between blue and green and butter-yellow.

The halos were gorgeous; Emmy stuck both hands in the box up to her elbows looking through them. Dawn wanted to know what colors halos could be. It seemed to her that maybe her souvenir was supposed to be a halo; at first it had looked like maybe the harp, but we could get a harp on Earth if we ever had money. Of course, Clair's souvenir had been a sponge and there were sponges on Earth too. Still, Dawn wanted a halo.

We found one that looked like it was made of amber, a smooth translucent ring, glowing gently with shifting brightness like a lava lamp. Emmy tried balancing it over our head. It didn't stick; it just fell like anything else would, back into the box, and it took a bit to

untangle it from one that looked like mother-of-pearl and a normal golden one. She tried again; maybe it had to be an exact distance or angle. It still didn't work, and rolled away a few feet and Emmy had to chase it.

Maybe Dawn had to wear it. Emmy wasn't an angel, Dawn was.

Dawn was already as far out of the Cave as she could get. If she leaned any farther she'd be fronting.

Emmy tried again. The halo fell and rolled up to the angel and clonked her on the nose.

Emmy fled into the Cave and pushed Clair forward again as the angel opened her eyes.

"Hello?" she said. "Oh, hello. Who are you?"

"Dawn," said Clair, scooping up the halo Dawn had picked.

"I'm Muriel. Do you need a halo? I have a lot."

"Yes," Clair said, "but I don't know how to make it fit."

"They're all the same size." Muriel yawned.

"I mean, how to make it float. It won't float."

"Let me try," said Muriel, sitting up. She held out her hand and Clair gave her the amber halo and bowed our head.

Muriel couldn't make it stick either. "Well," she said, "these do only work for angels."

"I'm an angel," Clair lied.

"Then I don't know why it wouldn't be sticking. Where are your wings?"

"Hidden."

"Hidden?"

"It's complicated."

"I won't be able to fix the halo if I don't know what the matter is."

We hadn't explained to anyone - we'd told Sam, kind of, before we went on the quest, but hadn't *explained* - and so far most of us did not have a very high opinion of angels, but that seemed racist when we thought about it, and Muriel had been nice. And it might be important for Dawn to get her halo. "I'm sharing this body."

"Well, I don't see how that would interfere, so long as it's your turn, right now..."

"It's my turn, but I'm not the one talking to - the angel in here isn't the one talking to you," Clair said, switching from directly relaying what Dawn told her to paraphrasing it. "She doesn't come out."

"Oh, well, maybe a halo won't work for her then," said Muriel. "That's all right, dears, you don't really need one."

"But would it work if she came out?" Clair asked for Dawn.

"Probably, I suppose, but that's no reason to go outside your comfort zone, just for a halo. They're only for looking nice, nothing important."

"But if she wanted one badly, and came out, for just a second, would it stick after that?"

"I'd think so, but again I -"

Clair took the halo from her hands and held it over our head, and Dawn leaned out, just for a moment, long enough to drop it into place, feeling clumsy with hands she'd never used and unsteady on

our feet, but she didn't fall and she didn't knock the halo out of place. It hovered. Dawn fled back into the Cave and Clair returned.

"There was no call for that," said Muriel. "That must have been exhausting."

"Just scary," said Clair. "It's okay."

"I suppose you know your own mind," Muriel said.

"Yes. We do." She liked saying *we*, instead of pretending to be Emily and not Exaltation.

Muriel yawned. "I'm going to go back to sleep, if you don't need anything else."

"We don't. Thank you."

And Muriel closed her eyes, and Emmy went out front again.

She was the only one left.

She took the halo off, from where it was hovering over our head - and put it back to make sure it would stick this time - and it did.

Emmy took the halo off a second time and put it in our pocket, with the comb and the claws and the sponge, and touched our fingertip to the ident chip in our hand and its low red glow, and she took the comb, and combed our way out of the angel world.

We landed in the art room.

The art room back home, the one on Earth, in our town at our school. The one we saw all the time. Emmy's drawing of Palisade was on the wall.

Did Emmy not get a turn? This was back where we'd started, back in our own world. Were we supposed to walk home from here, or maybe back to Sam's? Maybe we could call Sam on a school phone. We looked at the clock; it was eight p.m.

Didn't Emmy get a turn?

Emmy looked around the art room. She'd always wanted to be here alone, surrounded by all the paint and clay and paper she could ever want with nobody portioning it out, making sure she did the assignment, sending her on to the next class that she'd tuck away to let Zix handle when her time was up.

If Emmy didn't get a proper turn, at least she got to be in the art room at eight p.m., all by ourselves.

She got out a big sheet of paper, the ones that only ever came out for group projects like everybody putting a handprint on a poster or something like that. She got out paint and organized it all over an entire table she'd usually have to share with three other people. She got out brushes in every size, and a palette and a palette knife, and six cups of water so she wouldn't have to put a red paintbrush in blue paint water till it was all brown-grey.

She mixed colors and she painted, until she had all the pink and dove-brown and silver and yellow of the pale angel world, feet and wingtips peeking out from behind a column, a harp suggested behind the fog without trying to paint it quite clear. No rush, no grownups, nothing but paint and Emmy. She pinned it up to dry, standing on a table to reach the clotheslines across the art room ceiling. She got another piece of paper.

By the time she'd finished painting Hixaz, distant and blue-green-white-red, escape-pod plastic and metal around the corners of the picture and stars speckled in the sky, we were getting hungry. She hung up the painting next to the one of angel world, opened the door to the hallway, let us into the teacher's lounge - it was locked,

but the kind of lock where you can unlock it from the other side with a screwdriver, and one of the flat paintbrushes worked okay. There was a fridge in there, and some snacks. She ate chips and ice cream and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a microwave burrito. And she went back to the art room.

She painted a third sheet of paper with the griffins' peninsula, seen from the air, bright-bannered camp tents and woods and hills and shore and fields, blurry with distance and the motion of flight, griffins in formation on the ground, feathers visible at the edge of the picture. She painted a fourth with the sea, coral tower city lit with wave-filtered sun, free dolphins swimming away in the background, flat-faced mermaids with their bold hair and shimmering scales swimming from place to place.

She got out a fifth sheet of paper and hesitated, and then she did a still life of everything she'd gotten out to paint with, brushes and cups, mimicking the colors on the palette with tiny dabs of themselves, painting our own hand where it rested in the table.

She hung up her paintings and made sure they were secure and went to the water fountain and drank a lot of water and went to the bathroom.

And then she went to the front office. It was locked, and not the kind that was easy to open. Emmy frowned at it, and took out the comb. She didn't comb a hole to a new world with it, but she tried fitting it between the door and the frame, and it made a swishing sound and the door unlatched so she could pull it open.

There was a phone in there, and she dialed Sam's number.

It rung until it ran out of rings, and stopped. Emmy looked at the clock; it was almost three in the morning. We were tired, our eyes drooped, but didn't feel in the least tempted to go to the nurse's office and lie down and sleep. Emmy called Sam again.

Sam's mom picked up, groggy. "It's three in the fucking morning," she said, dancing syllable to syllable in her precise accent.

"It's Emily," said Emmy. "I'm at school."

"It's three in the - in the morning," Sam's mom repeated, but slower.

"I'm stuck. Can you come get me?"

"Why are you at school at three in the morning?" said Sam's mom.

"It's complicated."

"Where's your mother?"

"I don't know." Probably in the trailer but only probably, we wouldn't know if she'd gone somewhere else, we hadn't seen her.

"I... can... can you get out of the building?"

"Probably." The comb would do it, even if nothing else would.

"I can be there in - f- fudge - I can be there in ten minutes. Are you, are you hungry, are you - injured -"

"I'm not hurt. I found some food in here," said Emmy. She didn't think we'd be in trouble over taking it while stranded mysteriously at school but she wasn't sure, and none of the rest of us were either.

"Why didn't you call me sooner?"

"I only just now got the office door open."

"You poor thing. Do you need anything, should I bring anything -"

"I don't think so..." Emmy looked down at us. "Do you still have any of Sam's clothes from when she was my size?"

"It'll slow me down digging them out - how bad is it -"

"I'm just kinda dirty. I don't think I'll mess up your car."

"Emily, what *happened*?" said Sam's mom.

"It's a long story."

"You're not going to be able to deflect everyone forever, Emily."

"I'll tell Sam everything tomorrow morning. Okay?"

"...Okay. I'm going to hang up and get in the car."

"Thank you."

"Of course, Emily, I'm glad you know you can call me if you need help."

She hung up. So did Emmy. We waited out front of the school for the car to pull up. Emmy had taken a paintbrush, a nice one without any dings or stains, from the art room, and put it in our pocket with the sponge and the claws and the halo. That was her souvenir, and it was sort of stealing but there were a lot of paintbrushes in there. We put our hands in the pocket too, so the ident chip could be with the other souvenirs. We hoped we'd done it right - that we didn't need something nicer and more important than a sponge, something we could move around instead of an ident chip stuck in our hand. That we hadn't just done Emmy's turn completely wrong and she was supposed to have done something besides steal a paintbrush from the art room we were in for school all the time anyway.

We'd have to ask Sam in the morning. We were pretty sure it was going to be Saturday in the morning, so we would only have missed one day of school, and Sam wouldn't have to miss any if she had to talk to us all day about quest stuff.

Sam's mom pulled up in her little yellow car, barely recognizable in the dark, and Emmy got in the back seat and buckled the seat belt and fell asleep on the way to Sam's house.

We woke up on the couch in Sam's house, under a faded blue blanket with our head on a lumpy pillow. It took us a second to remember where we were, and why, and Palisade sat us up when we heard sounds coming from the kitchen. Palisade went and looked; it was Sam, making eggs. "Hi, Emily," Sam said, when she saw us. We were still wearing yesterday's clothes; she added, "Mom had to go to work but she left some of my old clothes for you that we never got around to giving to Goodwill, in the bathroom. And told me to ask you about your hair, but that can wait." Palisade looked at our hands; the green paint from worlds ago when she'd been disguised as a goblin was mostly faded and flaked off.

"Thanks," said Palisade, and we went to change into Sam's old slacks and blouse, and came out again and Sam gave us curry powder eggs and a cup of milk and sat down across from us.

"Mom said you told her you'd tell me what happened?" Sam said.

"Uh," said Palisade, hastily swallowing a mouthful of eggs, "yeah. You sent me on a quest, remember?" We were suddenly worried - mostly Zix was worried - that nobody would believe us, maybe not even Sam, even though she'd been there, she'd seen us leave -

"Yeah." Sam was looking at her plate, not at us. "I don't know what I'm going to tell Mom. I don't even know what happened after you left, or how you took a quest for five people, by yourself. You said you *were* five people. What does that mean?"

We'd told her that and now we were stuck explaining. Palisade took a deep breath. "We're five people, is what it means, there's - you mostly talk to me and Clair, sometimes Emmy -"

"Aren't *you* Emily?" Sam asked slowly.

"Emmy, not Emily. Emily's the body's name - I mean, it's like on my - on our school ID, we call ourselves Exaltation. *Emmy* is one of the people. I'm Palisade and sometimes you talk to me, and sometimes you talk to Clair. Dawn doesn't come out. Zix mostly does school and reading and watching TV, you might have ever talked to him but not much I don't think."

"I don't understand. I mean - I believe you because the quest was for five people and it worked for you anyway but - I don't understand," Sam said.

"I don't really know how to explain," said Palisade. "We never tried before. Uh, Clair can try, she didn't want to tell you but you already know now -"

Clair came out and said, "I'm Clair - it's not that I didn't want you to know, it's that it's so hard to say and it's weird, right, nobody else is like us. So there's all of us, and we... pretend to be Emily's imaginary friends, and we all have to share the same body, which people know as Emily, right? We go up to people and whichever of us it is, whether it's me or Zix or whatever, we all answer to Emily and say 'nice to meet you, I'm Emily', but we have our own names for each other. And whichever of us aren't out doing stuff with the body are - inside, we can talk to each other or I guess it's more like reading each other's minds kind of, and we have pretend bodies, which don't look like this one but Emmy's pretty close."

"And you can just - have whichever one of you be the one who's talking?" Sam guessed.

"Mostly, yeah - but sometimes one of us is too upset or something and won't come out, and Dawn never does, except she had to for a second to get her souvenir. We each got a turn, we went to a bunch of different worlds - except Emmy's turn just put us in the school art

room. She took a paintbrush. We hope that counts. We're not sure about Zix's souvenir either."

"What, um, what did Zix get?"

Clair showed her our hand with the glowing ident chip. "It *hurt*," she complained. "It's mostly better now though."

"I'm sorry. I should've - I thought I'd have longer to read and think about it since I didn't know you were five people, I wouldn't have -" Sam trailed off.

"It's okay."

"I think the souvenirs should count. What else did you -"

Clair started pulling things out of our pocket. Her sponge, Palisade's claws, Dawn's halo that made Sam gasp when she put it over our head, Emmy's chosen paintbrush. The comb.

Sam had left her quest book in her room. She ran to get it, brought it back to the table.

"The comb's so pretty," said Clair. "And Palisade likes her claws and Dawn loves the halo, even if she'd never be out to wear it, I don't know -"

"I'm pretty new at this, *maybe* nothing bad will happen if you skip turning your souvenirs into a thing but I don't want to risk it," Sam said. "Hang on, I want to try reading this again, see if it makes more sense now I know how you work - I need to practice reading the language next time we go to India or maybe I can find books at the library, or something online - anyway -" She frowned at the book, glanced between it and our things. Clair finished our breakfast.

There was a silence. Clair set down the fork when our plate was clean. Sam said, "What does Emmy look like?"

"Kind of like you," Clair said. "When you were our age - she's ten like the Exaltation is. She used to look more like the body but she changed after we met you."

Sam opened her mouth, and closed it, and swallowed. "What about the rest of you?"

"I'm a mermaid - I'm still Clair, if you forgot. A teenage mermaid though. I dyed our hair blue because my hair's blue. Palisade is a griffin. Zix is a space alien. They're both Emmy's age. And Dawn is an angel and angels don't have real ages," said Clair. "Emmy's drawn us all but we changed, a little, because on our quest we met people who were all of the kinds of people that we are..."

Sam nodded, a little distant, and frowned at her book. Clair slid off the chair and got a banana out of the fruit bowl because that was allowed at Sam's house and Mother would probably be upset at us for disappearing when we got home. We had room for a banana. She peeled it and started eating it and waited for Sam to say something more.

"Emmy looks like me?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Clair.

"And not a white person like you - like you look like, I mean."

"Yeah." Hesitantly, "Is that okay? She can try to change it back, but it's only how we look to each other..."

Sam sat back in her chair. "It's fine. - so what you do with the souvenirs is you put them all between the pages of the book, I guess including your hand, and then you close it on them, and then you open it again and you'll get your thing."

"Do we have to?" Emmy said. "- I'm Emmy now."

"You know, I think I can kind of tell - if I think about it - at least I knew you were someone else, I don't know I could've guessed which -"

Emmy smiled at her.

"Anyway, I think you'll like your thing."

Emmy took a deep breath and scooped up all our things and put them and our hand in the book and closed it.

Our hand tingled like we were plunging it into a bag of staticky rice, and then stopped, and there was something in the palm of our hand.

Sam opened the book for us, and there was Emmy's hand. *Emmy's* hand, brown and clutching something small and round.

Emmy opened her fingers and there was an ivory sphere, streaked with gold, the colors of the comb, pitted like a tiny moon. A fine long chain stretched from it, so we could wear it around our neck.

"My hand," Emmy said softly. She leaned forward to look; black hair fell over our eyes.

"Yeah," said Sam. "It, uh, does that, it lets you change shapes. I think - Zix - will still be able to do classes for you without turning into an alien, though. Since that would probably get a lot of attention, if he turned into an alien in front of people."

"But my *hand* - my all of me - Mother's going to - if she -"

"She won't," said Sam.

"Huh?"

"Your quest says," Sam went on, "that you get your reward - that's the necklace there - when you bring all your souvenirs home."

Emmy looked up at her.

"You look just like me when I was ten," Sam whispered. "So now you're my - my little cousin from Oregon, okay, and you're staying with us. I - we'll figure out what to tell my mom. She'll go along with it, I bet, because - the quest book says you get your reward when you bring all your souvenirs home - and you haven't been back to where your mother lives, have you, you called my house instead."

Emmy put the necklace over her head. She swallowed.

Clair came out, and if she just *stretched* Emmy's legs a little - she overbalanced, flopped onto the floor, Sam's old blouse too snug, Sam's old slacks vanished altogether, and her tail thrashed under the kitchen table. She'd banged her shoulder sliding out of the chair but she was laughing too hard to care.

Palisade came out and stretched wings she didn't have until she *had* them, and she was herself, half the size of any of the ones we'd met at Camp Counterscarp, a kitten-chick, and she bounded up to Sam and butted her head against Sam's leg, purring.

Zix came out, reached up Palisade's claws toward antennae that were there by the time he finished reaching, smiled up at Sam with blue lips. He stood, and stretched just how Dawn asked so she wouldn't have to be there more than a moment to make sure -

There she was, tall and winged and draped in a sheet because she was bigger than Sam had been aged ten, and her halo was back good as new, amber light shining down on her, white and gold wings touching the walls of Sam's kitchen, and she beamed down while Sam looked up in awe, almost crying -

Emmy came out and threw herself into Sam's lap.

Sam hugged her tight.

"Good quest?" Sam asked.

"Yes," said Emmy, "can we tell you everything that happened?"

"Of course you can," said Sam. "Tell me *all* about it."

Masquerade

When I was twelve I told Myron Lasko that I wanted to be him.

"Maybe when you're older, kiddo," he said, and he ruffled my hair and smiled at the nearest camera. Signed the cast on my arm, signed somebody's chest, took selfies with anyone who asked. Disappeared into a limo with a groupie. Another two of him had already gone, right after the concert, he didn't leave multiples behind for autographs. But on stage he harmonized with his own melody line, danced under the whirling lights in perfect step. Matching himself breath for breath and pivot for pivot so perfectly it would have been impossible for a team to achieve by practice, by anything other than being all three of him himself.

There were more by the time I was out of college, six sometimes appearing together, rumors of a seventh. Interchangeable; if one was offstage it wasn't because he couldn't sing out of that mouth, it was insurance, competing obligations, something like that. Six or seven or eight of him. A lot of people wanted to be Myron Lasko. He looked young as ever. Masks didn't age, and there was no reason you couldn't wear a mask of yourself, if you had the money to make them at all. All of him looked twenty-five and fit and beaming and glamorous.

I had an English degree and couldn't bear to move back in with my parents and was sick of eating ramen and I wanted to be Myron Lasko.

On his website's contact page was an email for "Mask Inquiries".

I wrote in.

When I was twelve I said I wanted to be you, and you said maybe when I was older. I'm 22.

Filled in the physical address slot with my sister's place in case my landlady's patience ran out. Gave my real name. Anonymity is for people you don't want to pull over your head like a paper bag.

Zapped a bowl of ramen and listened to all of his *Bridges* album and half of *Archiving Skies* .

His assistant replied. I guess even if there's seven or eight of you there's some things you want to delegate. There was a form eight pages long asking all sorts of questions. How was I insured for this and that, did I have debt, did I have competing obligations besides being Myron Lasko all day every day, my health history, pets.

I filled it out over the course of four days, not because I was dragging my heels or had to rehome a cat but because forms are excruciating. Sent it back.

Waited a few hours, checking my email over and over, then got a list of possible appointment times. I was supposed to block out a whole day.

I didn't really have any demands on my time. A few standing weekly invitations, karaoke with people I barely knew from college and board games with different people I barely knew from college, things like that, nothing I couldn't unremarkably skip.

I blocked out the offered Monday, slept badly all weekend, showed up in my interview clothes that my mother had bought me as a graduation present. They fit on me but I didn't fit in them; I kept wanting to scratch myself or adjust the collar.

Assistant met me in a little office in an anonymous skyscraper. I'd seen pictures of Lasko's houses and apparently I wasn't welcome in

them till I was him. Or maybe the assistant wasn't.

"I'm Briony," she told me. "Have a seat, help yourself to the caramels. How much do you already know about masking?"

"...what everyone knows, I guess," I said.

"You don't have to interview well in a conventional sense to wear a mask," Briony said, "please don't worry about describing it badly, just tell me what you actually know. Everyone doesn't actually know much."

"They're magic. You put one on and you're somebody else."

"I need to make sure you actually know what you're getting into. Legal reasons."

"If I'm wearing a mask of Myron then I'll look like him and feel like him. We'll both be able to do stuff but part of the deal is that he does most of the stuff, since I'm not on a mask-release prison program or something. If I take it off I'm back to being just me like I am now."

Briony nodded. "That's the gist. Mr. Lasko is a very busy man. He currently has an undisclosed number of mask contracts active, not less than five."

"Six. During the East Coast tour -"

"Not less than five. A self-mask does not count," said Briony.

"Oh." I took a caramel.

"He can coordinate all of his bodies at once with full-person amounts of attention, not only when they're doing approximately the same thing like performing. At any given time one may be writing music, another having lunch with friends, another recording, another

practicing an instrument, another asleep, another visiting his family, another updating his schedule with me. He tends to expand his to-do list to match whenever he gets a new mask. You should not expect a lot of time in control of the body."

"I don't need much. I'm -" I stopped before I said "boring", shrugged instead.

She nodded. "You can negotiate the exact details, but don't anticipate that you'll wind up with extra beyond what we put in the contract. Other than that, you'll be a passenger. You will look like Mr. Lasko, and you will not be permitted to do arbitrary things with his likeness in public - not even fidget or slouch, although you will probably find sitting up straight and still more comfortable in his form. Taking off the mask for good represents a considerable loss. They can only be keyed to a wearer once."

"I didn't know that part."

"Most of what you've heard is probably about the experimental prison program, yes? They deemphasize expense to the taxpayers; if they make it sound like the masks are reusable..."

I nodded.

"You *can* take it off and put it back on," she says, "if you want to add in some clause for time spent wholly as yourself, for instance with family. Once a month for a day is boilerplate."

"That sounds fine."

"In addition to his public life Mr. Lasko maintains a private one. He prefers interchangeable bodies - they don't feel obviously different to him in any way while the masks are on - and is unlikely to negotiate limited-use agreement with you except insofar as he will not take undue physical risk."

"...does that mean 'part of being him is sleeping with groupies' or -"

"If that is the limit of your imagination -" began Briony.

"My imagination? How's my imagination factor in?"

"What would you do with extra bodies?"

"...oh."

Briony nodded once, expression perfectly professional.

"...yeah that's cool with me," I said. I had not actually been having dreams about being in the middle of an orgy of multiple Myrons Lasko but I was sure going to start.

"Quite. This is the time to tell me if anything on the form was false or incomplete or complicated."

"I'm not totally sure about all the insurance information. I couldn't find all my paperwork."

"I can look into that for you. Anything else?"

I shook my head.

"Have you read 'Decoy' or a similar memoir?"

"Is Decoy the one about the masker who was the President - I read the one by Tammy Wise's masker, uh -"

"'Star of the Show'," Briony supplied. "That will do. You believe you'll cope all right with the sensation?"

"I think so."

"Reservations -" she prompted.

"Uh. I'm just generally apprehensive. How do people usually cope, are there usually problems?"

"There are not usually problems that lead people to default on their contracts. Adjustment periods vary."

"I wasn't really imagining it being so - contractual -"

"Masks are expensive. Mr. Lasko can afford them but must expect that they'll pay off in added time in his life. If you were hoping for an informal arrangement -"

"No, this is fine," I said.

"Let's go over the standard contract together, then, shall we?"

It was long. It was excruciating. There were so many paragraphs. Briony made me read them *all* from "...hereafter referred to as the Masker" down to the signature lines.

Though per 11.B Mr. Lasko will consistently use barrier methods and seek regular quality medical attention (see 66.M and 66.C respectively) the Masker will accept that there is non-zero risk of sexually transmitted infection accruing to the body and a non-zero risk of pregnancy in a sexual partner. The Masker acknowledges that the genetic relationship is Mr. Lasko's alone and will seek no custodial rights -

, accordingly, the Masker will not use allotted time in control of the body while wearing the mask to use Mr. Lasko's likeness before witnesses present or remote in any way not concordant with Mr. Lasko's image and stated wishes, notwithstanding Mr. Lasko's technical ability to intervene.

SECONDLY, should it ever be the case that the sole remaining body of Mr. Lasko should be the Masker's, it is understood that

the removal of the mask would present a hazard to Mr. Lasko's life and under clause 14 -

The Masker is responsible for, in advance of masking or while on a hiatus (see 29), setting up service "Thespyan" or equivalent of Masker's choice for verifiable authorship of online writings. Mr. Lasko bears no responsibility for unverifiability of writings and is not obliged to disavow, repudiate, or make any statement whatever regarding any publication of the Masker -

"Your eyes are glazing over," Briony said.

"No shit," I mumbled. "Nobody actually reads contracts."

"Mr. Lasko's maskers do read them. And understand them. You can go home if you prefer."

"No, I -" The memory of my apartment seemed very grey and small.
"No, I just need a break."

"I can order us some lunch. Thai?"

"Please."

She sent me a link to a menu and I picked a random curry and flopped on a couch in the corner of her office and stared at the ceiling till someone brought it up for us. I ate it without paying any attention to it.

"You're not a picky eater, are you?" Briony asked.

"Does it matter? His tastebuds."

"That affects it if you think cilantro tastes like soap. If you don't like the texture of yogurt it's another matter."

"I'm not picky."

"Good."

"Will you need time to set up Thespyan after we've finished going over the contract?"

"I've never actually heard of it before," I admitted.

"It's a face recognition and password app. You show it your face, and you answer a lot of numerical questions, and then after you type up a post on your blog or write an email or something like that, it'll ask you things like what's the number of rooms in the house you lived in age twelve minus the number of people named John you know times the number of second cousins you have? And you do that in your head, so Mr. Lasko doesn't see anything but the answer. And it won't let you send the emails or post the essays unless you get it right, or unless you take the mask off and it recognizes you."

"That's clever."

"You don't strictly have to have it but it's recommended. Mr. Lasko will not be spending time on disavowing having 'hacked' your account," said Briony.

"Why don't regular passwords work -"

"Even if he's letting you operate the hands and letting you look away from the keyboard - and that assumes you touch type - he can accumulate body memory. The answers to your arithmetic questions will be obfuscated to make it that much more inconvenient to perform algebra on them, however."

I nodded. "- so am I in, or -"

"Mr. Lasko will want to talk to you briefly himself, but approximately, yes, unless you bail on the remainder of the contract review."

"I'll cope."

I coped.

One of Myron's bodies blew in after I'd signed the contract (and Briony had ordered pizza for dinner, and I'd been quizzed on how many second cousins I had and how many times I'd read my favorite book). I was expecting to be grilled. Actually he just shook my hand and asked my name and wanted to know if I was sure, read Briony's notes and asked if they were all right, made sure I'd signed the (*interminable*) contract - then -

"You want to schedule a trip to the maskmaker for later or just go on now?"

"- uh -"

"She's not busy right now but we can probably get an appointment later this week if you need to wrap anything up," he smiled.

I swallowed and said, "Now's fine."

The maskmaker's workshop was bigger than it needed to be - masks were easily made, quickly enchanted. But the ability was so scarce that they could charge exorbitantly, and the place was beautifully expensive, tiled wall and floor in marble with gilded molding and curtained against the sunset. The maskmaker barely talked to me at all. She just murmured to Myron and took his money and pulled a white mask - no eyeholes, just a cast of a generic face - out of her safe. She chanted softly while she made a short, deep cut across his forearm and caught blood in a pool in the mask. She asked my shoe size. They were too small for Myron and she told me to take them off.

Then she took my hands in hers and arranged them so I could cup the mask like a bowl, and gave it to me, and gestured for me to put it on.

My hands shook.

"Clock's ticking," said Myron. "Has to be fresh, first time you put it on."

I held my breath and pressed my nose into the accumulated blood.

And I was Myron Lasko.

Not being in control of how I moved didn't feel like anything. In the same way I could walk without paying attention to individual steps or hold an object without concentrating moment to moment on keeping my hand closed, I moved as Myron wished. Maybe he was being very deliberate about every bit of body language but I didn't have to be.

He was really healthy. He had good posture. He took deep diaphragmatic breaths and went around by default with a faint smile. He had a low resting heart rate and clear uncorrected vision and a smooth way of moving our hands when he tried them out.

We fixed his other body's hair - a bit of it had fallen out of place. Tipped the masker. Begged the use of a changing room to get out of my clothes and into a set his other body had brought - it did feel strange when he talked, with a little of the phatic reflex of "thank you" and "you're welcome" and "you too" but for full sentences. We sounded like him, but distorted: this was what he sounded like to himself.

Then the other body left, and it was just us being Myron there, which was *strange*. I wasn't operating the muscles, but I was all alone in my head, and there was a vertiginous feeling of being unsupervised in Myron Lasko's skin. Who knew what I might get up to? But all I got up to was what he thought was next - he changed into the snappier clothes, dumped mine in the bag, thanked the masker again, went out and hailed a cab.

The clothes he'd brought included a phone in the pocket; we pulled it out and started reading his social media aggregator (the contents of which I was contractually obliged not to divulge). Eventually he emailed Briony.

I'm sure you've already seen the debit in the account but yes, the mask's on. Please make appropriate purchases for the house, XOXO

I couldn't ask what appropriate purchases might be, and that - didn't *feel* like anything, exactly, but did remind me that I wasn't driving. I simultaneously felt like I merely hadn't chosen to speak, and knew that I wanted to.

Myron couldn't even tell. He might talk to me at some point but some point was not this cab ride. We shooed the social media and went into a pitch tuning app and we sang into it, warming up.

We sounded amazing.

Holy shit, I was Myron Lasko.

We got out of the cab at his mansion and nodded to his security. Sang in harmony with another body who was home, though I never saw it; our twinned voices echoed through the halls while we poured ourself a cup of juice and the other body did Myron only knew what. Well. Myron and the applicable masker. It was easy to forget they were there. Presumably they could forget about me, too, they might not even notice I'd signed on if they weren't in use for the mask bleed or the preliminaries. Might not find out till they saw the updated estimate of how many bodies Myron had or he decided to have an all-hands concert. Or orgy. We all looked alike.

The juice tasted nice; whether it was because I would have liked the blend on my own or because I was using Myron's tastebuds was unclear. We sang a bit more. Sat on the sofa and picked at lyrics

(which I was contractually obliged not to divulge) on a battered legal pad.

Maskers needed sleep per body as much as anyone else, and it was getting late. We'd only gotten one line down without crossing it out before he put us to bed. Stashed the bag of my clothes in a box in the closet, brushed our teeth, changed into pajamas, crashed.

He fell asleep easier than I did. We didn't toss and turn. Just closed our eyes and morning came.

After we were up and showered (which was really something, although Myron wasn't as fascinated as I was and didn't linger like I might have if I'd been solo in his skin), dressed and breakfasted -

The house seemed empty; the other bodies might have gotten up earlier, or they could be still asleep, or scattered in half a dozen hotels.

"So how are you?" we said.

It took me a minute to realize he was talking to me and that I might be able to move our mouth, if I tried, if he was letting me.

"...fine," I croaked. I still sounded like him, but like a distorted version, his timbre and my tone.

"Forget anything you remembered last night, need a few to tell your folks, having trouble adjusting to the mask...?"

"No. It's - there's not much to adjust to."

"I've been told that. Never tried it myself from your end. You're all set to go back under?"

Is that what it was called. "Yeah. Thanks."

"Mm-hm." And he went back to working on the lyrics from last night.

I didn't have to think about lyrics for lyrics to appear. Without even secondhand access to the creative process I might have expected to get bored, but I didn't. I just went along for the ride and occasionally my mouth hummed or muttered, my hand jotted down a line in his handwriting. Crossed something out, added a question mark in parentheses.

He played a lot of instruments and I was apparently on tap to practice all of them, after he decided to put the lyrics down (they didn't look done). He danced my fingers over piano keys, drilling tricky bits and performing flowing runthroughs of classics and his own compositions. We strummed his guitar and we sang along with it, trying chords. We applied his ridiculous breath control to wind instruments because there were not fewer than six people wearing his mask and he could sing while accompanying himself on the flute if he wanted to.

We had lunch. We called Briony in response to a text I hadn't seen.

Two of his other bodies showed up and he test-drove harmonies for the new song. I kept expecting it to descend into an orgy but he was so resolutely focused on music that I wound up surprised when it actually did.

It wasn't like I'd imagined, which was in some ways a disappointment - no, Myron Lasko did not conveniently have all my favorite kinks - but mostly much improved. Myron Lasko, surrounded by himself, was as smoothly unselfconscious as if he were alone - he might as well have been for all the attention he had to pay to us, but distributing the sensation across multiple bodies did what one might expect for the experience. Also he didn't pause in the middle of his choreography to be sure that he was acting in character and imagining his own abs in sufficient detail, which gave it all an advantage over fantasy. He might have been careless about distributing the fun and the work between the participating maskers,

but I lost track somewhere in the middle, having come out well in the allocation.

So it was a startling upset when suddenly all of us froze and fled in different directions, seizing various of Myron's phones.

We called 911.

One of the other bodies had been murdered.

I didn't get a chance to ask any questions for longer than I considered reasonable. If someone killed a masker, Myron was fine - witness how he was running us around, contacting everybody to tell his family he was fine. Whoever had owned the body, if it wasn't Myron's original, wasn't so lucky. But he chose to first give the police all the information he had on the circumstances on the murder. It didn't sound like much; a different masker wound up being the one who spoke to the police as Myron propelled me to the door to peer through the peephole and let Briony in.

"I came as soon as I heard," she said, wringing rain out of her hair onto the welcome mat and hanging up her jacket on Myron's coatrack. "You're already giving a statement -?"

"Yeah. I didn't see anything conclusive but I can give them what I've got. Might help if they know how tall the guy was or something," we said. She opened her arms to offer him a hug; we took it.

"Who was it? I need to notify the family, the lawyers -"

"You know I don't keep track of them except by vacation dates."

"Have the ones who are left sound off," Briony suggested.

Myron released my voice. I croaked out my name. He took it back before I could ask anything. A moment later he reported, "It was

Brightman."

"I'll make the arrangements," said Briony. "I don't think there's any reason someone would have been after *her*, do you -"

"Even if they were, how could they keep track when I don't? It has to be someone has it in for me, I'll need you to talk to the security company, remove everyone who was posted there tonight just to be safe, double security on net."

"They *could* be after MacDougal, and just willing to go through people to get him."

"No one even knows about MacDougal," objected Myron. "Not that I've got him in particular."

"His family do, the court does."

"All right, yes, but they've known for the last fifteen years and nothing's happened. Meanwhile I get a heap of mail from people who want to lick my eyes and see my liver every week."

Briony shook her head. "It's more likely they're after you, but it can't hurt to let the police know that it could be someone trying to get at a masker they can't identify through you."

"Right. Fine," we said. "But give the cops all the creepy fan mail they could ask for, don't deliberately lead them down a rabbit hole about MacDougal."

"But you should *warn* MacDougal."

"He hasn't exactly been catching up with people from his past on his breaks! He's the one who reads Flat Earth articles and watches women's volleyball!"

"I didn't need to know that, Mr. Lasko."

"This one isn't MacDougal, apparently, how'll he find out? Anyway, there's nothing he can do with a warning but worry."

"Mr. Lasko, he has a right to know. If you won't tell him I'll email it to you until you read one of them with the wrong body and then he'll know anyway."

"That's low," we said. We shook his head.

"He has the right. It wasn't specified in contract but it should have been and when this settles down I'm bringing it up with legal."

"Fine. Fine, I'll tell him."

"Thank you. Is there anything else you need from me?" Briony asked.

We shook his head. Briony hugged us again and left.

All my questions had been incidentally answered over the course of that conversation, but I was still annoyed that he hadn't offered to let me ask any. If someone was going through Myron and his maskers to get MacDougal, or was even just out to get Myron, I was in the line of fire.

But he stayed on top of my body with perfect unchallengeable control until it was my day off. We went on the Dennis Mueller Show. We worked with a choir providing backing vocals for a couple songs in his next album. We talked to his agent about scoring a kid's movie. We did a series of concerts, a different venue every night, in groups of four and five, and took home girls and once a boy to ravish in pairs or singly. He sent my body home from the tour the night before he was due to leave me in control.

My first month as Myron Lasko elapsed and he let me have my break.

I woke up in control of my limbs, a sensation so nonexistent that I spent a good few minutes wondering why Myron was staring at the curtains unfocusedly not moving a muscle until I realized he'd abandoned me. Released me, anyway, he was probably still supervising. Could he redivide his attention when he was letting one of the bodies do as its owner liked? What did he use the extra to do, think of song lyrics even faster? Come to think of it, what happened to his attention when some of us were asleep? We weren't all on the same schedule; the bodies slept at this or that hour, while *Myron* was awake twenty four hours a day.

Experimentally, I tried singing. I had his voice, and that counted for a lot - I even had a month from inside of his body to know what it felt like to sing *right* - but I didn't have his talent and I didn't have his focus. It came out as though Myron were attempting to portray the Act One version of a character who began unable to sing and would have to produce a stunning solo in Act Three. Embarrassing. Awkward.

I went to the kitchen for cereal; on my day it was my job to feed my body. I brought my phone, from where it was tucked away in a sticky-note-labeled box in the closet, and answered math questions to get onto my various accounts through Thespyan. To my lack of surprise, no one had wondered very hard at my absence. The backlog of messages and mail I had to address once I shooed away spam and notifications about people's pictures of their cats came to three. One from my sister, one from my landlady, one from a board game friend. Huh, I hadn't known she cared... enough to badger me about leaving them short for the co-op game she got for her birthday.

I'd been waiting so much for this day but, just as I'd surmised when I'd decided to put the mask on in the first place, I actually mostly wanted to be Myron Lasko. But his days could be numbered.

I checked the news. It didn't cover the death. The person wearing the mask wasn't a public figure and *Myron* was still alive, plus maybe they didn't want a lot of reporters swarming around while they tried to solve it and the rest of us could still be in danger. I could appreciate that.

I looked up my stupid long contract. There was nothing about anyone's rights and obligations changing if an assassin had it in for the face I was wearing. I wasn't allowed to give out his email address to anyone except my emergency contact; I wasn't allowed to do extreme sports; I wasn't allowed to comment publicly on his sex life... my bailout options didn't say anything about murderers.

I got the nearest yellow legal pad, the kind he wrote lyrics on. I wrote, *I have some questions, Myron, for tomorrow*. I could have just said them aloud but I didn't know if he was paying attention. He gave no indication that he was; that would have been out of the scope of the contract. The handwriting came out a weird blend of mine and his. I was the one writing it but I'd been "practicing" his; as far as muscle memory was concerned, I'd been using his style for weeks now.

1. Who is MacDougal?

2. Where are the police on the murder now? News doesn't say

*3. If this keeps happening or looks like it's going to, can I bail?
Contract doesn't say*

I felt like I should have been able to think of more to ask but that was all I had.

I added *And I want to have a conversation about this, not get two sentences and wait another month to ask for clarification.*

I taped the page to his bathroom mirror so he'd see it in the morning if he wasn't looking while I wrote it, and answered all my

emails. My sister was going to a fancy party and that was exciting and could I reschedule my day off to go with her, she's sure she can get an extra ticket through her friend - no can do, Gina, already taking day off right now, need more notice to adjust timing. I'd told her that I was on a demanding work schedule, but hadn't mentioned the job and she hadn't asked. Landlady wanted to know, had asked weeks ago, if I was going to pay my rent - nope, I'd already rescued the essential items and she was free to junk the rest and keep my security deposit. Board game friend was pissed that she didn't have enough board game guests to play Crowd Mode of her new game, how could I, didn't RSVP, she knew full well I never had anything important to do... that one I ignored.

I was allowed to take off the mask entirely, on my day off. I just had to put it back before going to bed. It had been a long time since I'd seen my own face.

I got naked so I wouldn't be wearing his clothes in my own build, grabbed a blanket in case any other Myrons walked in. Passed the mirror on his closet door on my way to sit down on the bed in "my" bedroom. Gave myself - still Myron - a good looking-over. He was just really unfairly lucky on every axis except for the part where someone was attempting murder.

I reached behind his ears and pulled off the mask.

In a cold rush, like taking off a clammy wetsuit on a winter day, my skin, my own skin, was exposed to the air again. My hair had grown - Myron's had too, he was permanently enjoying a frozen biological moment from when he'd been bled to make his first mask but that didn't freeze his hair; we'd had a haircut a week ago, a manicure on Tuesday. Mine was long enough to brush my shoulders now, not startling for a month of growth but startling to see all at once. I looked pale - hadn't gotten any sun in my own skin. I blinked at the mirror, worried for one hypocritical moment about Myron looking through my eyes to see my own form in the nude, remembered that

Myron was in the mask I now held in my hands. He knew I'd gotten undressed and taken the mask off, but the mask was both what let him know that and what let me look like him, and both came off at the same time. I was alone.

I sat on the bed, pulled the blanket around me for warmth. Imagined, vaguely, pursuing something other than being Myron Lasko. I could go to medical transcriptionist training, which Gina had once evangelized to me. I could be a flight attendant and squeeze in tiny chunks of tourism on foreign shores between flights. I could try to get more student loans, go to music school, see if this month had taught me enough to succeed at what I'd given up on aged fifteen.

It didn't appeal. If I'd ever been good at working towards things, I didn't have the skill to reach for it now. And doing anything else would be work, and being Myron was effortless glamour and success and art, held in my arms as long as I was willing to share them. Not everybody would be suited to being Myron but I was, I thought. It was a way to be. Worthwhile. My input to the work wasn't creative in nature, but he could get more of it done with me. Briony wasn't exactly composing concept albums and nobody would have thought she wasn't helping Myron create. I was like Briony, except having more fun than she probably did, and I was good with that.

It *was* nice to have a day to spare, though, just to make sure that I was a participant in my life.

My phone rang. I let it.

It stopped, then rang again. And again.

I picked it up. "Hel-"

Myron's voice: "Put it back on." He sounded breathless, strained.

"What?"

"Put - put it - mask -"

I picked up the mask, planted my nose in its nose, transformed back into Myron Lasko.

We said, "This is the only one left."

He let me talk, which I only thought to try because a moment ago I'd been the only person in the room. "The only one left? Did every other body get -"

Myron took over. "It was the matinee in Greenville. Maniac opened fire on the stage, I don't know how he got the gun past security, we fired everyone who was on duty during the first killing so if there was a man on the inside - one survived long enough to call you."

He paused. I tried and found I could speak. "You can - without your original -?"

"My original body's been dead for years. Motorcycle accident, haven't touched one since."

"- you've been just a bunch of masks for *years* ?"

"Yeah. Works fine. And now I'm clause-fourteening you, till I can find more maskers."

I tried to reach for my phone; our arm stuttered, and finally he allowed it. I looked at the contract again to find clause 14. "I didn't realize," I said, "when I first read this, that it meant you don't need your original body. I guess it does. And now I - don't get days off any more?"

"You don't get to take the mask off any more and if I catch you trying I'll stop you because if you do I will *die* , the one who called you died in the ambulance thirty seconds ago. You can still sometimes do things, like you're doing now."

"Thousands of people will have seen a bunch of you get shot at a concert, you're not going to find more maskers soon."

"The cops are working on it. Once they catch the guy, there's always people who want to be me," he said. "We just hole up in the house, we don't let anybody in, till they have their man."

The doorbell rang.

We didn't move.

"It could be Briony," I said, meaning the doorbell, but, "she couldn't have gotten here from the concert in that time," Myron said, meaning the murderer.

We looked out the window rather than the peephole, barely twitching the curtains. It was Briony at the door. Myron got one of his own phones and called her. She picked up. "Myron! You're alive?"

"Barely," he said, like a person with a mere single body was only just clinging to life. "I'm not letting anyone in."

"I suppose I can't hold that against you," Briony said. "I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"I had to clause-fourteen this one."

"I suspected as much, although the hospital won't talk to me."

"I'll tell them they can disclose to you -"

"No, state law, they'd need permission from the maskers too," Briony said; we could see her shaking her head on the front doorstep. "The *police* will talk to me, and they said security caught the suspect, with the gun, so assuming he was acting alone this is all going to be over soon."

"That's a relief. They haven't gotten in touch with me yet."

"They don't know there's one left, no one knows exactly how many you have and they might not have gotten in touch with the jurisdiction that you were in last time yet either. I'll pass it on."

"Thanks. And - cancel everything - just - everything."

"Even though they caught the -"

"I'm down to one body and I'm a little too rattled to sort out priorities inherited from half a dozen, Briony!" he shouted into the phone. "I'll pick some things up once I - later. I'll - Briony, getting shot *hurts* . I'll pick some things up later. For now cancel everything."

"...All right, Mr. Lasko."

"Thank you."

She hung up. We watched her leave.

Myron ran his hands through his hair. Opened up his calendar and watched as Briony pared down the schedule, dizzying flocks of to-dos disappearing until time slots were scheduled only three deep, then two, then a schedule one very determined person without any spare hands or brains could accomplish if he wanted to, then - nothing but a single copy each day of "lunch hour" and "dinner", color coded as things done alone, not while meeting someone for an interview over lobster.

It was lunchtime.

Myron went to the kitchen. Stared into his fridge. I didn't know how long it was going to have to last us before he'd be willing to go out, but at least he wasn't one of those rich people who ate at restaurants all the time and had nothing but mustard and booze in the house. At least he knew how to cook, better than I did even, didn't have a chef employed for the purpose and didn't have to

resort to horrific noodle experiments to get anything to eat while fencing out everyone from the building.

He made grilled cheese.

"Put pesto on it," I said, not knowing if I'd be able to suggest it until I already had. I'd seen some on the fridge door.

He paused in assembling the sandwiches, then got out the pesto, slathered some on, resumed cooking. "I feel very small," he remarked. "I've had more room to think than this for - so long, now. I fill it, you'll have noticed I fill it, but I get a whole person's attention for every body, and I don't need it all if they're eating or smiling at a camera or - so I had more space."

"I'm sure lots of people will want to be you once it doesn't look like a good way to get murdered," I said.

"You know, I'm not sure that'd put everyone off? Sometimes people seem to want to put on a mask to stop existing. Might not be too picky about the details, some of them. Probably there are legal reasons not to take on new maskers till the murderer's definitely in custody and definitely the murderer, not some guy the murderer planted his gun on or something... Do you want to stop existing?"

"No," I said. "I left a bunch of questions taped to your mirror, one of them was if I could bail out what with there being a murderer after you."

"Well," he said. "You can't. Not yet, anyway, and by the time I have another masker it'll be past time to worry about the murderer." He flipped the sandwiches.

"Yeah," I said. "I like being you, mostly, at least more than I liked not being you."

"Keeps me on my toes, having an audience all the time. I watch less television now than when I was just one of me. I mean, when I was just my original me," Myron said. "You folks aren't here for that, you're here for the music, the meeting other celebrities, the sex, that sort of thing. Gotta show you a good time, make it as fun as it looks."

I didn't deny it. "Who's MacDougal?"

"He's dead now," said Myron. "Died on stage. He was - you know how sometimes they'll do parolees in masks? It's expensive but it lets them go free, be supervised while they go through the twelve steps or the anger management training. But they don't like to have one parole officer masking a hundred people, too much concentrated power, you see? You wind up with so much room to think, so many people you could suddenly control, and if you quit one day that's a lot of people they have to get masks off of and deal with some other way. And the expense. And there's some worry that a court'll slap down the idea, cruel and unusual, you know, they want to be able if it comes up to trot out poster cases - even though they only do this with prisoners who volunteer. So - MacDougal, he was a rapist. Nasty piece of work, forty girls accused him. I don't know if you heard, you would have been pretty young when he was caught."

"Somebody could have wanted to murder him just like Briony thought."

"Somebody could have, but I still think they were after me. No one but the court and my maskmaker and the family knew who he was wearing... Anyway, they didn't want to let him do his own thing, he played around a lot with plausible deniability and grooming and that shit, not something a parole officer would catch if they were mostly letting him drive, they didn't want someone paying him a fraction of their attention while he set up to do it again. So once they got a conviction, I think half the counts went through, they were like, how

about a masking celebrity, it's not cruel and unusual, people volunteer for that, but you won't be able to do your thing, and he said, all right, as long as I get laid sometimes. And nobody ever *asks* me who's under the mask."

"Creepy," I said. I plated the grilled cheeses.

He bit one, or maybe I did. We bit one. " *You've* probably fucked him, haven't you, because you were both me and I mixed you all up like my guitar picks until I had to give somebody a day off, but it didn't make any difference to you, did it. Next batch I'm having us all wear inscribed rings. It doesn't matter who's wearing me when I pick up a fan, I'm the only one they meet and the only one making the decisions, and anyway he's dead now. So that's who he is." He talked around the sandwich a bit, and I might not have been able to understand him if I'd heard the sounds recorded, but I could feel what he was going for, and that closed the gap a little like lip-reading from the inside.

"Okay. Thanks for telling me."

"Mm-hm." And we applied ourselves to the sandwich.

The prints on the gun matched the guy Security had nabbed. He was the right height and he didn't have an alibi for the first murder. He didn't make bail.

Myron let Briony in the house, and she hugged us, and he ordered groceries while they discussed scheduling. He un-canceled his attendance at a benefit dinner and un-canceled an interview on the grounds that he needed more maskers and exposure was necessary for drumming up interest. Concert tickets had been refunded and there'd need to be choreography and timing and logistics changes to accommodate there being fewer of Myron anyway - not to mention the costumes he'd been wearing had gunshot holes and blood now - so that slot was still open, for now. He pushed back composing, cut

back on rehearsal, rearranged everything to fit it into twenty-four hours a day, with a heavy emphasis on social obligations and face time.

The benefit dinner was fancy; Myron dressed up even relative to his normal street clothes, which were fine and fitted to begin with. I recognized my sister Gina, across the room - was this her fancy party? Wouldn't she be amused to know that I was already there, my rejection of her invitation notwithstanding. She recognized Myron, whispered to the friend she'd brought instead, but she had no way to recognize *me*. I tried to whisper to Myron that I wanted to say hi, but he was firmly in control; my attempt wouldn't even feel like anything as he swept through the room, shaking hands with the organizer, smiling at people trying to catch his eye, signing an autograph, pausing at his dinner plate to sip water and read the place cards he'd been put with. He was going to sing; he was the musical number for the night and they'd been upset about his cancellation, hadn't been able to replace him on short notice.

There were speakers, first, he was supposed to sing as the appetizers came out. He leaned on his elbow, smiling faintly, probably more to look generally affable than out of any interest in someone's empty buzzwords about her personal connection to ending childhood malnutrition with community gardening and a summer holiday replacement for school lunch. He looked around the room. His eyes settled on my sister and her friend where they were whispering cheek to cheek, glancing at him intermittently and smiling when they realized he was looking their way.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

I strained and searched and squirmed-without-squirming, looking for anything he was leaving to me, but he was effortlessly parked on every muscle I possessed, sitting easily in his damnably flirtatious

forward lean, all ready to put moves on my sister in *my body* . I should have told her. I should have said, "Sis, by the way, my weird job that only gives me one day off a month, not even weekends? It's masking for Myron Lasko. Don't hook up with him, not unless you've checked and it's not me under there." I should have told *Myron* : "For your information, here are the names and appearances of all my family members; I understand that knowing exactly how many cousins I have will reduce the security of Thespyan, and I'm okay with that".

I tried to shift posture, I tried to blink, I tried to grind his teeth, I tried to make a sound. Nothing.

He wasn't going to go anywhere with her until after dinner. I had that long to wait for him to check in with me at all, to let me say a word while he ducked into the men's room or waited backstage to walk up to the mic. And he'd better do it because if he made me fuck my sister then the next time I had my arms I was yanking that mask off my face and he'd never see it coming.

...would I get prosecuted for murder? It was strange to think about. I'd probably get prosecuted, I didn't know if I'd get convicted.

At any rate, this was mostly my own stupid fault, he probably thought that if I had any sisters they'd know, and she didn't, and he had better let me talk before he brought her home.

The speakers rotated through; when everyone was looking more bored and hungry than they could cover with a pretense of fascination with meals on wheels, appetizers appeared in the wings borne by a fleet of waiters, and Myron excused himself from his tablemates to go around back. He strode on, all bright smile and long steps, and he put the microphone to his lips and he crooned a glurgey song he'd written for the benefit. Exclusive first performance, except for how the other maskers and I were really

the ones who got exclusive first performances. I'd liked it better before he revised the third verse.

He smiled at Gina when he got to the last chorus. He had better let me talk.

But my chance didn't come before we sat down and started tasting canapés, or after, when we got the salad course. He was too far away at his assigned seat to *talk* to Gina, but he kept looking that way. I dared hope he was more interested in her friend, but I couldn't be sure, not based on where he was looking. Probably he was going to aim to pick them both up at once.

Fuck.

I didn't have any chances to do anything, not even twitch his hand to knock over the water or bite his cheek, let alone speak or make some urgent gesture at Gina. Not during the soup course, not while he cut up and nibbled on chicken over a bed of pickled vegetables and something called freekeh that I'd never seen before in my life, not once dessert and coffee came around. He took cream, no sugar, and made eyes sisterward over his demitasse.

Fuck.

He finally went to the bathroom after his second coffee. *Let me talk, you ass, let me -*

I got out a half-syllable, "Sh-"

And then someone walked in and Myron apparently didn't want to be heard talking to himself, so he shut me up. He did wait, though, parking in the stall silently, letting whoever it was finish their business and clear out. When they weren't immediately replaced, he said, "You were saying?"

"My sister," I blurted. "She's my sister."

"- which one?" he said, sounding appalled.

"Brunette."

"I can have the redhead no problem?"

"Never met her but she's hot, go for it," I said.

"Damn. Why doesn't she know?" he asked. "Should have suspected - if your family knew you would have had to tell them that you didn't die, I would've seen - Briony had to notify a lot of next of kin, you didn't want a minute to reassure anyone -"

The door opened, and I didn't reply. Myron let himself out of the stall and washed his hands and went back out. Gazed flirtily only at my sister's redheaded friend. Gina looked offended. I'd have to explain later. How would that go? Dear Gina, Myron was absolutely down to fuck, it's nothing against you as a specimen, but unfortunately for the both of you he's down to one body and it's mine, and fortunately for you and I, I had a chance to tell him before he took you home and covered you in whipped cream.

God.

Myron smiled at photographers covering the event. He signed a large check. When people were milling around between tables, he sidled up to Gina's friend, got her name (Carol), got her number, got her into his car when the valet pulled it up. Gina hissed at her while we left, but her friend was undeterred.

Myron took Carol home. He grabbed whipped cream, because he was predictable like that and had the metabolism of his twenty-five-year-old self forever.

When we came back into the bedroom, Carol was gone and a man stepped behind us from beside the doorframe to aim a gun at the back of Myron's head.

"C-carol?" Myron said.

"Guess again," said a man's voice.

"Where's -"

"She's not here any more, Lasko," said the voice. "And I think you'd better stop asking questions."

He jammed the gun harder against our head. I could only tell that Myron was leaving me options because of how I flinched, gasping a high ragged inhaled sound that Myron in his perfect breath control couldn't produce even under these conditions. How had he gotten into the house? It was crawling with security, not even Briony had a key, it -

Carol had been a mask.

"Why," said Myron's voice, and I didn't know if it was him or me. I had enough questions beginning with "why" that it could have slipped out.

"Because you're a mockery of our art," said the murderer. "Half a dozen of you on stage at once? Vacationing in the tropics while you go on television and bed a teenager and eat caviar? It's magic and you've turned it into a spectacle. You're not the only one, no, but you're the worst of the lot."

Don't quip, don't quip, don't quip -

"The proper use is murder?" Myron said, oblivious to my mental plea.

"You *disgust* me," said the murderer. "Get up."

I tried to sort out in my head how this must have gone down, while Myron did the work of piloting us out of bed and down the hall with a gun to his back. Why were masks scarce? Almost nobody could make them. If one *could* make them, one could have plenty for one's own use; you could make them out of papier-maché if you wanted, papier-maché and blood.

So working backwards: offer to wear a Carol mask free of charge. Tell her you'll wear her to the charity dinner, you'll buy her plate, tell her to flirt with Lasko, she's exactly his type, all you want is to ride along vicariously while she does it, he'll never look twice at *you*, and she can take it off when she's done with her night of fine dining and musician-seducing, but if she could please leave you a way to signal if you need to take a breather with the mask off -

(We descended the stairs.)

Might or might not have been an active ingredient that Carol was Gina's friend: tell her to bring someone along Lasko won't sleep with because of course all his maskers updated him on who their relatives are. Could be a coincidence, maybe he would have just also shot Gina if she'd joined in.

(We went out the back door. The house let out onto a private beach, deserted in the predawn light.)

The middle attack had meant to get them all and get Myron to let his guard down if it didn't work, but nobody knew for sure how many maskers Myron had so it had to cover both options. That spree of murders would have finished Myron off if I hadn't answered the phone. Fingerprints matched, but a mask would do that. There was nothing about the process of putting on a mask, as I'd now experienced, that had to be consensual. You could just fill a mask with your own blood and plant somebody's face in it and they might be noticed missing but they'd never be found, until the murderer decided he was tired of being partly in jail and took the mask off.

They'd be able to trace the DNA in the mask blood, maybe, but they already had an exact physical copy of him in custody, clearly he wasn't worried about being identified.

(The murderer marched us toward the sea.)

First one, he had to have impersonated someone in security. You couldn't wear a mask of someone without letting them control you if they wanted to, so how did he do that without the security person in question just slipping off the mask? Maybe he'd just done that one conventionally. Snuck in. No, I had to be missing something about that part.

"How'd you get the first one?" I asked.

"I've got the security company owner's son hostage," said the murderer. "Masked. He'll jump off something tall and land as himself if Daddy puts a foot wrong. Very motivating. He happened to get away clean, too, didn't have a chance to crack under questioning. Convenient. I'll let Junior go once I've mopped up this last one of you."

"How do you know this is the last one?" said Myron.

He paused. "Well," he said, "I don't hear sirens."

"Other one's asleep," said Myron.

The murderer frowned at him.

"You've got about four hours to get away, if you don't startle my other body awake by shooting me," Myron said. "I know this is really you, since you were wearing Carol."

"Take your mask off," said the murderer.

"I've got John W. MacDougal under here and I'm not letting him go," Myron lied.

"That was you who took him? Then you won't miss him when he dies."

"Cops'll be on you in five minutes once the other one wakes up to call them. They'll find your other bodies, too, that boy, anybody else, now that they'll know you're a maskmaker."

"...Throw me your phone."

Myron threw him his phone.

"Walk." He gestured down the beach.

We walked.

When we were a good ways from the house the murderer tied us to a disused pier and ran away.

"That was close," I said.

"And he could turn around any second so tell me now if you're an escape artist," said Myron, squirming in the ropes.

"Sorry."

"Didn't think so. This is gonna hurt -" He pulled; the post on the pier gave way before his joints did, though it still wrenched the hell out of his arm. We ran, houseward, as fast as we could.

"I need to call my sister," I said.

"Why?"

"Carol. Gina's friends with Carol. And Carol talked to him, met him somewhere, maybe could find him again - he believed you that I

was MacDougal so he didn't set you up with someone related to me on purpose."

"Right," he said. "You do that, I'll - you email her, I'll call the cops on speakerphone?"

"Yeah," I said.

It was a long jog but Myron was up to it. We hit the house running; he threw another phone on the table, dialed, gave me the use of his hands to grab a laptop and log in to Thespyan and write Gina. It wasn't comfortable - I kept reaching for muscles he hadn't thought to give me and kept accidentally typing things he was saying to the police, while he sometimes read a word from my email because our eyes had to be trained on the screen - but it more or less worked.

They arrived without sirens to avoid spooking the murderer, and had the fire department on standby in case he tried arson. Myron told them about the security guy's son, and I waited for Gina to answer her email. Myron didn't want to get off the phone with the cops so I couldn't call her.

Gina was usually pretty prompt about answering emails, but every minute felt like an eternity waiting for them to catch the guy who'd just waved a gun in our face. I wanted to pace; Myron held us still. I settled for sending her another email in case a fuller inbox would bring her answer a moment sooner.

When Gina replied twenty whole minutes after I'd first written her she sent me a great deal of swearing and then added that she'd told Carol to call the police department too, so that was my idea handled. *Now* Myron paced, marching back and forth across the kitchen with his hands behind his back. There was nothing else we could do but wait for the cops to finish whatever they were doing; the speakerphone was still going but the lady on the other end hadn't said anything for a bit. Reports came in slowly, or they hadn't changed.

"Need another masker," muttered Myron.

"So you can care less whether I live or die?" I replied.

"Don't take it the wrong way," said Myron. "But, well, yes. I've survived being murdered twice - more than that if you count the concert shootings separately - because I had maskers and now I *don't* and the bastard's still on the run, himself and as many masks as he's got, and his *masks* can make *more* masks, and I just have to hope the police academy's trained people to deal with a madman who said 'no, I'd rather not be a multibillionaire by working for half an hour a week, I'm just incredibly into murder, and by the way, anyone I can hold still for fifteen seconds after cutting myself is another one of *me* ' -"

"Yeah," I sighed.

"Uh, Mr. Lasko? Who are you talking to?" asked the cop on the phone.

"My masker," Myron told her.

"This isn't your original body? I'd understood it to be -"

"- you people don't know how masks work, do you," said Myron in exasperation. "Okay. I'll explain. You need to know this if you don't want him to run off and disappear." And he took it upon himself to go over everything there was to know about masks for her. It was soothing, in a way; yes, the police department was dangerously undereducated about a key characteristic of the case, but we were making a contribution to the effort now, even if it was appalling that the effort needed making.

When he'd run out of things to tell the cop about masks, he subsided. "Is it all right if I hang up?" he asked.

"Yes, but we're going to send a squad car out to your house to keep an eye on you," she said. "You don't have to let them in, but they'll be parked in the driveway to scare him off if he approaches, all right?"

"Mm-hm," said Myron, "thank you, officer," and he hung up and went to find us something to eat. Hunger had hit suddenly, after stress had kept it at bay. He fried up a burger. I told him to put pesto on it, and he did.

"I like this being able to talk thing," I commented, when the burger was gone and he was putting milkshake ingredients in a blender.

"I could get used to doing it sometimes. Not in public - though you do have to show me pictures of everyone else you're related to, seriously, especially women aged eighteen to forty -"

"I will, I will."

"I can do it sometimes. It'd be weird if you started talking to the other maskers, though."

"There aren't any yet, perhaps it'll turn out we have nothing in common," I said.

"It would be weird," he repeated. "But if we're alone in a room, I can let you talk in case there's anything you need to say. That's not going to - ruin your experience of being me, or anything?"

"Nah," I said. "- maybe if I talked while you were trying to do music, but I can just not do that."

"If you did I'd stop letting you, I need silence," he said firmly.

"But if you're just making food -"

"You want to tell me to put pesto on it," he interrupted dryly.
"Understood. I can work with that."

"Thanks."

"No problem. Thanks for, uh, saving my life."

"You're welcome."

We waited by the phone. He plugged it in to charge, when it got late. He looked at the squad car at the end of the driveway, paced a little more. He attempted briefly to play piano but couldn't keep focus on it. He went to bed.

In the morning he had voicemail from the cops; they'd used Carol's information to find one of the murderer's masks and removed it from the wearer, they'd found the security guy's kid and taken that mask too. The one in prison had been demasked and the wearer released on bail, supposedly tried for the possibility of collaboration in a likely futile prosecutory effort. Which seemed insane to me, but I suppose nobody could prove that he hadn't been the murderer's pawn, helping mow down Myrons just like I occasionally volunteered opinions on pesto.

They had the real, original body of the murderer - they believed - cornered in a hotel room, but he'd gotten a hostage. The hostage was wearing him, and they both had guns, and were pointing them at each other. Cartoonishly enough, the cops didn't know which they could shoot without getting an innocent bystander, and couldn't approach to remove the mask forcibly without whichever one was wearing a mask getting shot. They were having a standoff, or maybe it would be better called a siege. The murderer's bodies could sleep in shifts, each training a gun on the other to maintain their indistinguishability though one would never really fire, but they didn't have any food in the hotel room. Sooner or later they'd, or rather he'd, give up.

Still, they weren't turning themselves in *yet*, and Myron worried that the murderer was waiting for someone to put on their own mask of him, held in abeyance for whatever reason. This would work if there was still at least one living body of his at the time, but a dead person can't live in an inert mask; if some sleeper masker waited until after the police had shot him to don the thing it would just be stained papier-maché. As long as the murderer was still alive in any body - and this very flight risk meant that he couldn't count on being kept that way in custody - he could turn up across the planet on a moment's notice, supposing that he'd prepped for this.

His face was all over the news. Myron kept it on in the background, and the occasional detour into stories about a fraudster in the finance industry and a guy caught smuggling exotic plants across the border and a speech delivered by the First Lady were invariably interrupted by bulletins with a series of photographs of the fellow: the one from prison before they'd taken the mask off, the ones they were besieging, the one they'd found worn by the security guy's son. The anchor's voice went over and over, maybe prerecorded, over the danger he posed.

"That's not going to be good for my odds of getting another body," muttered Myron. "Everybody thinking about how much this incredibly dangerous murderer wants to waste me and anybody wearing me."

"Was there anybody you had to turn away in a screening before you could get ahold of again?" I asked. "Somebody who you would have had to keep closer track of, not use for some things. Right now you'd rather have one who didn't want you to have sex in their body than nobody, right? Or someone who wanted more days off, or didn't want you to eat, uh, non-kosher food or something."

"Maybe. Briony would know better than I would - she might have already thought of it -" He grabbed the nearest phone, picked out a message to her. "She screens everybody, I only meet people who

pass her filter. I don't know how hard she tries to scare people off, but that's mostly about the money and a lot of insurance just paid out big, and it's worth more to me now..."

"She didn't try *very* hard except for making me read the whole contract," I said, "that part was torture."

"You'd rather have just been stuffed in a mask with no idea that I could clause-fourteen you?"

"I wasn't expecting any of the weird contingencies to come up!"

"They usually don't! But you've had an exciting time of it, now, haven't you," Myron commented. "Not at all the sort of authentic being-Myron-Lasko experience I try to deliver."

"A little too exciting, yeah. I'll be glad when it settles down and you're just back to working again and can play piano for more than five minutes at a time. I like it when you play piano."

"Piano specifically?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe I should keep better track of this sort of thing since I'm going to start distinguishing bodies with jewelry anyway. What's your birthstone?"

"Alexandrite," I said. "Some months don't have several to choose from, though, you don't want Briony turning someone away because they're an amethyst and you already have an amethyst."

"Drat. I mean, I could vary it in some other way... and it'd help me memorize your birthdays..."

"Oh, do I get a present?" I asked.

"Maybe. Not that I know what to get you, you took me off before you exhibited any characteristics on your break and then I died a few times before you could even get very far into wherever you were going with that, so."

"I didn't have any plans. My life was incredibly boring."

"How does that happen?" wondered Myron. "I know it does, of course, but - how? If you're bored, can't you... go.... do things?"

"...some people aren't as passionate about something as you are? Or they're not good at it, and so when they try to do it as much as you do music, nothing interesting happens, and it feels like a waste of time, and they get less passionate," I said. "Or - or it's like when you start trying to play the piano, and then you can't, and you stop. All the time, with everything, not just while they're recovering from near death experiences."

He looked at his hands. "Yikes," he said.

"It'd be good if more people were like you. I mean, by themselves," I said. "But we're not. So apart from the whole murder thing I'm glad you and me could work something out."

"Me too," he said. "I mean, I feel like you're getting the raw end of the deal here."

"Funny," I said, "I feel like I'm getting something for nothing."

The cops risked tear gassing the hotel room after the siege hit twenty four hours, and the murderer and his masker didn't fire in the distraction; maybe he'd even lost track of which was which however he'd coded their clothing or posture to mean "this one's the hostage". Or he didn't want to endure the pain of getting shot if he couldn't be sure of his aim getting a kill shot on the first try. Or it

had been a bluff to give a sleeper time to decide to don a mask to begin with.

They went in and got the guns away and took off the mask. The murderer's original body got shot. There wasn't a protocol for extrajudicially executing a guy for being a maskmaking murderer, but considering the sleeper wearer possibility, nobody really expected the cop who killed him to be convicted, and if she was it'd probably come down to a suspended sentence or something like that. Call it defense of the innocent, whichever patsy had one of his masks in a drawer somewhere and instructions to put it on.

Briony dug up past screened-out candidates who didn't want to have sex with men even if they were other Myrons, or eat anything spicy, or go without a day off every week, and found some who were still interested if their conditions were met. Myron picked and masked two of those whose limits he felt best able to work with. I memorized their names, just in case it ever came up. He also got another parolee, a violent recidivist drunk who wasn't too put off by MacDougal's fate. MacDougal had lived to be fairly old without suffering a day's infirmity, being Myron Lasko, and it was safe enough now with the murderer mopped up (or at least deprived of the advantage of surprise) - there'd been no sign of him rearing his head anywhere, living on as another body -

We were probably safe. Pretty sure.

"It would have been poetic if you'd masked the maskmaker," I commented.

"Probably cruel and unusual for him," Myron said. "Being me when he hated me so much. And that would have left him alive, left his masks active if he even did have any..." He hovered a spoonful of pesto threateningly over a bowl of ice cream.

"Don't you dare," I said, and we laughed, or I did, or he did.

He bought us all silver rings with our initials engraved into them and put them on each right-hand ring finger.

Myron felt more like himself in four bodies again. He announced a comeback tour, of sorts - after a hiatus of only weeks it was more of a confirmation tour. He called it "Resurgence", wrote a new song about being murdered several times for it - I would have liked it more if it had been a metaphor, but everything in the song was literal.

He looked at my ring a lot, and I saw his other bodies looking at those rings too. He kept track of us.

He did most of his piano practice with me. Ducked into the bathroom to check in before picking anyone up even though he could now recognize my entire family tree and all my exes.

My sister wrote long emails about throwing my life away, but I wasn't. I was exactly what I'd wanted to be when I grew up since I was twelve.

I was Myron Lasko.

Dose

This story is also available in audio, which you may find on [this episode of Wingardcast](#).

"Your request has been denied," said the automated voice on the other end.

"The *fuck* it has," I screamed into the receiver. "I *broke* my *leg* ! What, is there an interaction with my pain meds, to *hell* with my pain meds -"

The automated system didn't answer.

"Operator," I said. "I want to talk to a human. Uh, does swearing work on this one - fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck? Shit? *Shit* , you heartless machine -"

It didn't give me a human. I couldn't really see that being a competitive job posting, manning the complaint line for the school pharmacy.

I dialed again.

"You have reached the U of M pharmacy line! Press one to talk about a change to your prescription. Press two to request dosages for excused absences, administrative error, or other extenuating circumstance. Press three to transfer your prescription to another university -"

I pressed one. Two hadn't worked or even gotten me a person.

"Press one if your prescription may be interacting with another medication. Press two if you feel your dosage should be adjusted.

Press three if you need a supplementary prescription for a project.
Press four if -"

I tried pressing one.

"Please hold."

Twenty minutes of scratchy elevator music later, there was a real person, hallelujah. "Hello?"

"Hi, this is - my student number's 5440981."

"Okay, I'm looking you up - what can I do for you, Skylan?"

"I broke my leg, so I've missed a class and I'm not going to make it to the later ones, but the autosystem wouldn't assign me a delivery?"

"Oh, if you have an injury like that you're supposed to call disability services to get you to class," said the person.

"What? Are you kidding me?" I demanded. "I'm already shaking, and this isn't - this isn't in the pharmacy info packet - I need the delivery -"

"Skylan, I'm seeing two previous deliveries for absences this semester - one because you were... hung over? And one because your... dog died?"

"- so?" My grandmother's dog counted, right? I loved that little fuzzi-ball.

"So, two is the number of dubious excuses you get per semester -"

"But I broke my leg!"

"And disability services can get you to class, and if you haven't tried that, then the excuse is dubious," said the person. "No delivery, but

you can still get two thirds of your dose for the day if you make it to Latin and Research Methods, and I'm sure the disability office will be happy to help you out."

"But -"

"This is the interactions line; are you on anything for your leg?"

I read the name off the bottle. She told me there were no interactions. She hung up.

I called disability services. They showed up with a wheelchair that, at the cost of all the muscles in my arms, I rolled up the hill in time to get me to the last half of Latin. The TA wouldn't hand over a dosage packet for anybody more than five minutes late.

I got to Research Methods on time and barely made my participation quota. I got my one-third dose, time-released as though I'd already had two, painfully slow to stop the tremors. It wasn't enough; I couldn't get to sleep that night. At one in the morning I called a friend.

"Skylan? Why the hell are you calling me this early?" she mumbled into the phone.

"Your pills are little green triangles too, right?"

"- ohhh, you're fixing. Fuck, you know they can put anything in a little green triangle, right?"

"Yeah but they might *not*, what if -"

"I don't have any extra, Skylan."

"Are you sure -"

"Go fuck yourself, Skylan." She hung up.

I called three more people. One of them did have extra but his withdrawal symptoms were tiredness and headaches, not shaking, and the last thing I needed was to be addicted to somebody else's schedule on top of mine.

The next morning the elevator was broken. I threw the wheelchair out a window and dropped out online and skidded down the stairs one at a time on my butt and got on the bus home.

"That was so rash, Skylan," said my mother.

"Yes, Mom, I know," I said. I was sitting on my hands so they wouldn't jitter, but it was starting to wear off.

"You'll have a lot of trouble getting in somewhere else, now."

"I know, Mom."

"You really shouldn't have been doing parkour in the first place."

"Uh-huh." If I broke into the school pharmacy, they might have packets with my name on them already sorted and stamped for the TAs.

"Are you listening to me, Skylan?"

"No, Mom."

"You have no idea how much I wish you were still on your little treats."

"If you give me a treat I'll throw it in the toilet, Mom."

"They got me through your childhood!"

"I bet they did, Mom."

"They might let you reverse your dropping out if you asked very nicely."

"Don't think so, Mom," I said through gritted teeth. *I did not want to do this twice.*

I ate frozen meals and a lot of burgers from All Organic Drug Free Andy's Burgers in case there were "treats" in the homemade macaroni and I lowered my standards for a job to nothing. My mother had not yet resorted to threatening me with homelessness to get me addicted to treats again by the time I had an interview.

Mission Pharmaceuticals needed a person who was less hackable than an algorithm to decide whose doses were printed into what shape of pills. Ever since the big Varaco hack had leaked information on a million parolees' condition-of-release drugs, so they could get the same chemicals on the street by name or formula, it was standard practice to mix it up: a pharmacist would know what you were really taking, but it might be a little green triangle or a long white lozenge or a purple circle with milled edges. Nobody could hack into an employee who decided on a whim to give a new client daisy-yellow pentagons or blue gelcaps.

This mind-numbing unautomatable task did not require a college degree.

"Remember," my new boss clarified, "people can be hacked, just not by software - but if someone asks you for information you're not supposed to disclose, it's probably going to be a secret shopper, as it were. You'll be instantly fired if you talk to one of those and may be liable for criminal charges. They might show you a suitcase full of cash, they might pretend they can prove they don't work for us or somebody who's testing you on our behalf - don't believe 'em."

"Got it," I said.

"Excellent," he said. "Here's the handbook of the shapes, colors, and variants we offer, Ista will show you around, and you can get started tomorrow morning."

I spent eight hours a day sitting in a cube, sometimes typing "yellow yellow yellow white blue ecru RAZZAMATAZZ™ kiwi-green white gold maroon" into a spreadsheet, sometimes tooling around on the internet. My trial period ended when I completely failed to notice the ostensible secret shopper cozying up to me at an office Christmas party; this constituted passing with flying colors.

"Where do I go for my work doses?" I asked my boss, when the trial was over.

"Oh, of course," he said. "Next to the payroll office."

"What's your policy on absences?"

"We give you a week of stepping down," he says. "To keep at home, according to the at-will employment agreement, see, you can wean yourself off if you quit suddenly. You can dip into it if you take a sick day or vacation day and replace it whenever's convenient for you."

I took my seven installments of stepdown meds in their numbered-compartments box, threw it into the back of the utensil drawer in my delightfully Momless studio apartment, and showed up every day in the office left of Payroll to get a lavender sphere to swallow.

When I'd been working for seven months I got a secret shopper in the form of a young-looking guy, maybe sixteen or at least picked to look that way, who "spotted my company T-shirt" in the All Organic Drug Free Andy's Burgers. "You work for Mission," he said.

"- yeah," I said.

"I have to know what I'm on," he said. "My dad puts it in everything, doses me first thing in the morning and last thing before I go to bed,

I can't be away from home overnight without -"

"I can't tell you anything," I said.

"You don't understand. He's, he's - I need to get out, my brother has a place but if -"

"I can't tell you anything," I repeated.

"Fuck's sake!" he said, beginning to risk making a scene in the burger joint. "Heartless bastards, why don't you *screen* people you give your shit out to -"

"Can't - tell you anything -" I said, visions of "treats" dancing in my mind.

"Just tell me if going cold turkey's gonna actually kill me," he pleaded. "My brother can lock me up or something -"

"I can't even look that up from here," I said.

"Do you remember anything -"

"Man, I do hundreds of these things a day, you could *show* me a pill and I wouldn't know whether it went to a dad or a school or a cult - what are your withdrawal symptoms -"

"You think I *test* that? If I don't get away clean on the first try my dad's probably going to straight up kill me, I have no idea - school gives me the same thing, brown shield shapes, he got them to match it, I get one every *hour* -"

"Then I don't even have a guess."

" *I'm the one who's taking them! I ought to know what they are!* "

"If you are over eighteen and terminate your formal relationship you have -"

"Sixteen."

"- the right to an own-expense, pharmacy-assisted offramp from - well if you're sixteen I *really* can't help you, I'd lose my job, dude."

" *Please* ."

"I told you I can't even look it up from here."

His dad, presumably, honked a car horn outside, and the kid jumped and took his sack of burgers out the door, slouching.

I couldn't look it up without my work computer. But I looked it up the next day, brown shields. I didn't make many things shield-shaped; "Skylan happens not to like shield shapes" was a valid input to my vitally important unautomatable job. There were four patients on brown shields in the system. The kid had looked maybe Hispanic, so he was probably Juarez and not the Polish name or the two Korean ones.

All the drugs had code names that I had access to - RAZZAMATAZZ™ was incompatible with "wakey-wakey" and you couldn't put "nightsong" in a gel cap, that sort of thing, so I needed to know. Juarez was on "chipper". I didn't know what chipper was, but whoever assigned the code names was before my arrival; they might have been from pre-Varaco-hack and used ones that the Internet knew about.

I got home and looked up "chipper".

According to streetyourdrug.com, chipper was impossible to dose like Juarez had described - if you took meaningful amounts every hour of the day you'd have seizures in your sleep. The pharmacist would have told Dad Juarez not to do it that way, and if Dad Juarez had ignored the instructions he'd have an epileptic kid. So Juarez Junior wasn't a very well-informed secret shopper. Wasn't actually Juarez at all; the real Juarez was on chipper, on some sane

schedule, the secret shopper was making up "brown shields". That settled that.

The kid's face turned up dead on the news a month later, beaten to a pulp by his dad and passing away in the hospital. His brother, Joe Juarez, was making a big fuss about it on the news.

Mission wasn't implicated, obviously, everybody dosed their kids, it was possible to dose abusively just like it was possible to apply curfew abusively - not dosing your kids was practically neglect -

I took a vacation day.

I tested my withdrawal. I wasn't sure I was going to go back to work, and it would be better to find out what I was in for if their stepdown wasn't gentle enough while I still had seven days in the drawer.

I was fixing an omelette for dinner when I noticed that nothing had happened.

I took another vacation day and didn't take my stepdown pill.

Nothing happened.

I went back to work, skipped the trip down the hall to the pharmacy. My lavender sphere arrived at my desk in a paper cup anyway, and I took it, and waited two hours - nothing took longer than that to kick in -

Nothing happened.

I didn't say anything for a couple weeks. Swallowed my spheres. Remembered, eventually, to "replace" the stepdown doses I would have taken. Typed "lozenge shield oblong teardrop round round round round round double-circle rectangle round".

I mentioned Juarez when my boss and I were in the breakroom simultaneously around lunchtime. My food was in the microwave, he was rinsing out his coffee mug.

"I recognized Juarez," I said. "The dead kid."

"He was one of our patients, yes," my boss said.

"News said he had a place to go but was scared of withdrawing."

"Mm."

"Was he a secret shopper?"

"What? We don't hire children to secret shop, if someone underage tries to get data from you they're adults playing younger."

"He wanted to know what he was on, so he could get away."

"You didn't tell him, did you? If that was why his father -"

"I didn't. I didn't even know. I looked it up later, but..."

The boss nodded and hung up his coffee mug to drip dry.

"He told me he was taking something every hour he was awake and I looked it up and it said chipper," I said. "You can't take chipper like that."

Boss paused.

Boss turned to leave the room, but stopped to pat me on the shoulder. "If he'd tried skipping out," he said, " *Mission* chipper wouldn't have kept him going home for more."

The microwave beeped and my boss left in my moment of distraction.

The kid's drugs were fake, like my lavender spheres were fake, but he'd never checked. He would have seized to death years earlier if they'd been real. If he'd tried running to his brother's place he wouldn't have needed to score street chipper, he'd have just been fine.

Maybe every drug Mission sold was imaginary.

Pink blue cyan blue cyan blue white white gray orange red red orange red red white pink gold yellow RAZZAMA-fucking-TAZZ™.

I had a job offer from Andy's Burgers - "you've got the menu memorized anyway, ha ha, anyway I need a new fry cook! You come here all the time, you want free lunch and dinner?"

Blue blue yellow yellow white brown yellow orange gold cyan green kiwi-green apple-green dark-green green green green green.

I didn't have any illusions that flipping burgers was an intellectually stimulating job but it had to be better than

(white white orange red red pink red gray purple purple lavender teal yellow white white green blue)

this.

(brown brown brown brown brown)

Andy's Burgers were Drug Free but lots of food was sold that way, you could eat a completely nonaddictive diet if you wanted; if you couldn't help but get a Dinah's Coffee+ Shake every morning that was your own fault. Mission Pharmaceuticals was slipping placebos left and right and how long it could do that depended on how long it kept the secret. What if the next college dropout they hired to

(cyan green green white blue orange)

type colors and shapes into spreadsheets ran their mouth off? Told the next not-a-secret-shopper that he was on chipper or bounce or sunshine or winner, got them running away from their dad or their school or their cult and scoring some on the street and *noticing* ?

(pink green pink teal)

Or found out like I had, or some other way, and just alerted the media?

(gray)

This could be important. I could matter to it. It was just so *stunningly* boring. Eventually - I knew myself well enough - I'd give up, stop coming in -

I went to the pharmacy around the corner from my apartment.

"I need something for my sister I'm taking care of," I said. "She's fifteen, about my weight..." It was probably possible to get a supply that was officially for myself but I would have had to go farther than a block and talk to someone for longer than fifteen minutes. I went home with a package of orange teardrops and brought them to work the next morning to tuck away in a drawer.

Work gave me lavender spheres, probably to keep their inventory neat or make sure everyone had paper cups in their wastebaskets if someone wandered in off the street. Every time I brought one to my desk I also opened my bottom drawer.

With the placebo spheres, I took orange teardrops.

Will

Tarinda felt like if one was rescuing a sleeping maiden it was important to dress for the occasion, so before she got underway she sourced some chain mail and a sword. She commissioned a whole mantle and shirt for the purpose and got it done in twenty colors and caught her hair in it and extracted her hair from it and put on a hood under the chain, strapped the sword to her back, and set out.

O'Leary Ranch, Racetrack, Riding, and Restaurant sprawled over several acres of Mars and its staff were happy to reserve a right to a pony for Tarinda to collect later, and a certified refurbished O'Leary line robot to go with it and do all essential pony care. She didn't pick one out in particular right away, although she did detour from her quest to sign up for a jousting class, since she already had the chain mail.

Miracle Movies, headquartered on Titan in a sprawling complex of warehouses and sets, sent a film student called Kayv to talk to Tarinda when she said she wanted to discuss something with them.

"Have you ever heard of 'Templars of the Antares Desert'?" she asked him.

"...yes, actually, but most people haven't, it was canceled six episodes in," said Kayv. "Sort of a cult hit."

"I need sixteen seasons of it."

"Wow. Um, why?"

"Rescuing a sleeping maiden," Tarinda said.

"Awwww! Okay, uh, does it have to be seasons in particular? That's no longer a conventional format."

"...I think comparable runtime and a similar number of plot arcs would do. But I want the original actors and writers."

"That might be expensive. The one who played Vakror in particular was vocal about not liking the show afterwards."

"Can you fix whatever he didn't like about it?"

"Probably? We'll look into it," Kayv said.

"I can pay for it. I saved up."

"What elements of the show should we be particularly sure to keep close to their original characteristics?"

"I have a list." And she presented him with the specifications for the future of Templars of the Antares Desert, including that Vakror was supposed to get together with Lyn-Tra, there needed to be more development of the Polestar Children, and whoever wrote "Escape from the Caves of Salind" did not need to be invited back.

The Cosmetic Adjustment Association was a station orbiting Venus and swarming with brightly colored and oddly augmented people. Tarinda spoke to a person of ambiguous gender with cornflower blue zebra striping on an ivory background, or perhaps ivory striping on a blue background. "Hi! What can I do for you - ooh, if you don't have anything in mind I would just *love* to get creative with your ears, I think you've got the sort of face that would be very well-framed with really elaborate ears - can't see them under the chain mail thing you've got going on there -"

"No thank you," said Tarinda. "I'm just wondering how well you can aim at 'pretty' as understood by past eras without that being very

well-specified?"

"Hm," said the stripey person. "I mean, I'm sure I could get something that would be considered conventionally attractive. We can even usually combine that with 'recognizable as themselves'. But if they don't specify any details we risk losing parts of their face they like - you can build a lovely face around almost any individual feature or couple of them but if they don't say which ones -"

Tarinda nodded. "But if I can tell you that she likes, say, her nose and her eye color -"

"I'd be happy to offer touchups as necessary for free, given how confident I could be in the initial result with those specs," nodded the stripey person. "I mean, towards 'conventionally pretty for whenever', if she wants sparkly irises or frills later that's another matter."

"Gotcha. Thank you."

"Do you want to book an appointment?"

"No, not yet, I don't know how long this is all going to take."

"Well, ask for me when you're ready."

"I will!"

The Historical Journal of Pre-Singularity Prime-Secondary Sources had an office in Rome. Tarinda got a falafel-calzone fusion thing loaded with red onions and waited for someone to meet her and then sat down with Magister Sorrentino. "I need to deregister a sleeping maiden," she told him.

" *Deregister* her!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. I can't rescue her while she's still on your books as a subject. I can let her know about the option, later, but you can't come and bother her."

"We never interview people who are unwilling -"

"But you ask them to find out if they are or not, and you try to convince them. So I need to deregister this one - I have the paperwork -" She displayed it.

...He sighed. "If you insist. What is her name?"

"Corrine Wallace."

And he wanted the date and place of birth and death off the paperwork, to disambiguate her, and her name was removed from the list of possible Prime-Secondary Sources.

Morris Jenkins, Rosie Jenkins, Emmeline Jenkins, Sara Wallace, Tasha Wallace, John Wallace, Benjamin Wallace, Chloe Wallace, Paulette Sydney-Wallace, Thaddeus Sydney-Wallace, Lyric Sydney-Wallace, Nimue Locklear, Tarn Locklear, and Vera Locklear, some of whom lived on the Moon, some in Minnesota, some in Argentina, and some in Sichuan, were variously asked nicely and/or bribed to leave Corrine Wallace alone once she had been rescued. At least until such time as she asked for them.

"But she's my great aunt," said Lyric.

"She'll probably want to meet you soon," said Tarinda, "but you can't bother her until then."

"...will you make sure we know when she's ready -"

"Of course."

The Institute of Archaic Psychiatry was a glassy building on an Irish hill populated by scholars with out of date aesthetics, although more "labcoats and glasses" than "chainmail", so Tarinda still stood out. She waited until one of them had a moment to speak with her.

"What brings you here?" asked Dr. Patel.

"I'm trying to rescue a sleeping maiden and I need to know what the state of the art on curing depression is," Tarinda said.

"Ah, I see," said Dr. Patel. "There are several types and several presentations of each type. Some can only be fully treated at this time via periodic applications of miracle unless the person opts for fairly invasive modifications with considerable side effects..."

"I've budgeted for some miracles."

"Are there any comorbid conditions?"

"A little anxiety."

"Then your sleeping maiden will be fine. If she has one of the more treatable kinds, we can find that out and transition her to another solution without any resumption of symptoms, based on analyzing what results the miracle has. Just bring her here with your receipt."

"Thank you!"

"You're welcome! Good luck."

Ginnifer C. Ross, 1999-2078, 2078-indefinite, worked as an "insurance salesperson" in a reenactment village in Wisconsin.

"How much would I have to pay you to let me find your location to within ten miles at all times?" Tarinda asked her.

"...are you asking this out of character -"

"Yes."

"....why?"

"I can promise not to share it publicly but I don't want to disclose the reason. You can charge extra for that."

"Oh. Uh. Fift- call it seventeen singles?"

"I mean permanently -"

"Seventeen singles per half-century."

"Got it. Thanks. What were you saying -"

"Um, in the time period where I actually did this job, insurance was solely denominated in money, with no availability of miracles to restore anything that couldn't be replaced that way, because we hadn't invented the Singleton yet and it couldn't handle even extraordinary situations. So if I were to sell you 'life insurance' it would mostly be intended to cover lost wages and funerary costs for your loved ones."

"Dreadful."

"Yeah. ...You know your outfit is a couple centuries off."

"Oh, I'm not dressing up for the village. This is for something else."

Tarinda held a miracle in her hand, crackling and hissing - they didn't have to do that, but if you dropped one behind the couch you'd want to be able to find it again, and it was aesthetic - and brought it to the resting place of the sleeping maiden, and kissed her on the mouth and pressed the miracle into her chest.

"Cory," said a soft voice.

Cory didn't want to open her eyes. She was comfy. She was warm. Someone was snuggled up to her, breathing on the back of her neck, arm around her waist, and that was sure to be a dream and she didn't want it to go away -

The warm person nuzzled her neck. "Cory," she said.

"Mrrf."

There was soft giggling. The voice did not repeat her name, just held her.

Eventually Cory observed: "I was supposed to be dead."

The warm person kissed her hair. "Not forever. You were sleeping."

"...I thought I gave them kind of an impossible list. When they wanted a will."

"It took a while."

"Are you my dream girlfriend, then, I said I wanted my dream girlfriend."

"That's the idea. I mean, maybe you won't like me. But I like you."

Cory rolled under the encircling arm. The voice belonged to a face, rosy brown and freckled, with gold flecks in dark eyes, and a froth of black hair. Smiling. They were in a bed so soft she could have felt a pea through it. Cory was in a nightgown that she thought might be literally silk and Dream Girlfriend was in pajamas with a pattern that looked plagiarized from wallpaper. There was a heap of chainmail and a sword in the corner of the room for some reason.

"I - what else did I -"

Dream Girlfriend petted Cory's hair back from her forehead. "I have it in my pocket, do you want to read it?"

Cory nodded. She took the folded paper.

Fine, I want a fucking pony . And don't even think about bringing me back before Templars of the Antares Desert is sixteen seasons long. I want to be pretty and - don't wake me up until there is nothing you want from me. I don't want a job or interviews from history professors or a great-great-grand-nephew needing a guardian, isn't that the most selfish thing you ever heard, why are you even making me do this - I want a cure for depression and my dream girlfriend and to never have to do anything I don't feel like ever again - and to never have to see or even think about my ex - maybe if you could do all that you could wake me up. No, I don't care if you read my journal, I'll Anne Frank it up -

"All of that," said Cory. "Really?"

"Yeah," said Dream Girlfriend.

Cory touched her face. It was smooth, soft. Ran her tongue along her teeth and they all lined up. Brushed her thumb over her eyelashes. "Is there some agency that does this sort of thing? Taxpayer dollars for miracles..."

"Only if they want simple stuff. Not you. You I rescued myself."

"- what's your name -"

"I'm Tarinda."

"...hi, Tarinda."

Tarinda grinned at her. "Hi Cory."

"The not wanting anything part."

"You don't have to be my girlfriend. I'll be fine. I can find you another one if you want. But I think you'll like me."

"Then why did you...?"

"I wanted to rescue a sleeping maiden. I liked you. So I rescued you," said Tarinda. "I don't need you to do anything you don't want."

Cory hesitated. Tarinda was still cuddled up and she was *warm* and Cory could actually finally give a shit that she was comfortable, her head was clear and -

"It's nice to meet you, Tarinda," she said finally. "Do you want to marathon Templars of the Antares Desert with me."

"I would love to," said Tarinda.

A screen on the ceiling clicked on.

In the year 2095, a colony ship bound for Alpha Centauri encountered a wormhole, and spiraled out of the reach of the Singleton. With no miracles and limited supplies, they settled the only habitable planet in the Antares system. Now, in the year 2252, the peace of their world is threatened, and their only defense - is the Templars, intoned the narrator.

Cory and Tarinda stared up into the credits as theme music swirled around them.

Story Of

"You wanna make a baby?" he whispers in my ear.

You're easy to convince to play outside. Mom tells me I always wanted to read, from before I can even remember; you always want to get your boots on and run around. I have to nag you to do your homework, to study, to come in and learn things that aren't how light spills between your fingers if you shade your eyes from the sun. Heptapod doesn't interest you at all; you think it looks like coffee stains.

One of my colleagues makes a remark about regression to the mean, when I bring you to a conference with me when your father cancels suddenly; it's all I can do not to hit him.

I don't nag you very much, because I know, and you deserve every minute of splashing in the water you can fit.

I don't tell your father I'm sorry, not once, I'm not sorry, I can't be sorry, can I? You deserve every minute -

He doesn't fight very hard for custody. Maybe he thinks it will hurt less if he detaches early. Maybe it does. I don't fight hard either, I don't need to, I know -

And then you are mine, and it's just us and a wave-kissed backyard and presents I know you'll love before you open them, and I need every minute.

I miss him.

You miss him. Divorce is an adverse childhood event; you pretend you can shrug it off, like weekends of him are enough, like you don't think it's about you.

It's about you.

"Ian -"

"Hm?"

I know how this conversation goes and I can't not tell him. I can't turn away and say never mind, because you're his too, he loves you, he has to know.

"Did you ever get any better at reading Heptapod?"

"No - not after they were gone - it's not my specialty, really, without the urgency. I can decode it pretty quick with the program they whipped up for us, though, why?" He's chewing a celery stick, he's not even looking at me, he doesn't know.

"Do you remember what I said about time?"

"You said something about time? Was this when you were loopy having breathed their atmosphere and all -"

"Did you ever wonder, about how I called General Shang?" No one ever asks how I get the number. I am cleared of suspicion of spying - I know I have to be to show up at the party - and no one wants to know how I could call China, no one obstructs me from going home.

"I figured Costello gave you his number and you phoned him up and ranted in Chinese."

"I don't speak Mandarin." Yet, but this is how this conversation goes.

"- huh?"

"I can pronounce the phonemes and the tones, but I don't speak it. I knew what to say because he told me what to say later at the celebration. Heptapod consciousness is outside of time, it's because of their language, if you learn to really read it you can too, I remember the future."

"Does Shang read it too?"

"I don't know. Maybe. He's not a linguist but he's multilingual, reads a character-based language, he might have been able to learn it before then."

"Okay, Louise. Predict the future."

"Hannah's going to slip on the rocks there and come in with a scraped left knee. You think the scrape looks like a car and make her laugh while I disinfect it." You're playing in the yard, just past your fifth birthday, not as surefooted as you will be.

He snorts.

You fall and cry and get up and run in with muddy shoes, tug at the cuff of your shorts to show us, and it's shaped like a blob with wheels but he thinks it's a perfect Toyota and you giggle while I wipe away blood and then you go back out with a band-aid on and he looks at me like I've grown a second head.

You get the flu when you're eight and I know you will be all right but I make chicken soup and have decongestants and you ask how I guessed. I say it's mother's intuition and you don't buy it.

I tell you you're unstoppable.

You aren't.

"What if she was going to die in a *car crash* ," he hisses at me, late at night long after you've gone to bed. "Would you give her the keys?"

"It's not like that. There's no way to not give her the keys for this one."

"Early detection matters -"

"I try it. I can't find a doctor who'll even run the tests before she shows symptoms and she starts insisting on being seen without me in the room."

"Insist back."

"It doesn't work. I try anyway. Do you think I want her to die -"

" *You should have told me before we made her.* "

"Ian -"

"How could - *sixteen* -" Pacing, clutching at his hair.

"Ian I couldn't I already loved her."

"You should have loved her enough to stop her wasting away before she finishes high school!"

"I love her I love her this is not a problem I can solve by having there be less of her *Ian* -"

"How does this end," he asks, gesturing between us. "Tell me how it ends."

I close my eyes. "You go stay with your sister. You divorce me, no fault, can't tell a judge about it - you see her weekends -"

He calls your aunt Megan.

You visit them on Saturday.

At your funeral he takes me aside and asks me if I ever loved him or if I only wanted you, was only using him to make you so that I could have your bright eyes and play-doh animals and crayon drawings and tickle fights and poems - He doesn't say that part. He stops at asking whether I used him.

"I love you," I say. I never do lose the skill of speaking in the past tense, but it's still true then, I love him. I love the way he holds me and the way his mind works and the way he trusts me when I shout a language I don't speak into the phone.

"You could have said anything, when I asked. Anything other than 'yes, yes I do'. You could have said 'tomorrow', and it would have turned out differently."

"That's not what happened."

"Did you have no choice or did you want her too much to use it?"

I pause, thinking. I know what I say, but the thinking about it still has to happen at some point in time, and this is when. I think.

"I don't know," I say, "I never tried to do something I remembered not doing."

"Never - if she'd died in a car crash would you -"

"I would've tried, if it had been a car crash," I murmur.

"But you wouldn't try for me, you wouldn't try to keep *me* -"

"I wish I had a sister," you say. You're ten and eating your birthday cake and your friends have all gone home and it's just us and it feels

so quiet.

"Oh?" I ask you.

"Yeah. Or a brother, but the boy palindrome names aren't as good."

"Not in English. There are some nice Arabic ones."

"We're not Arabic. I wish I had a sister."

Six years after you die he calls me. I answer him.

"How long have you been remembering the future?"

"Hello, Ian."

"Answer the question."

"In flashes since early in the heptapod project," I tell him.

"Consistently since the very end."

"So you've remembered - whatever we're about to say to each other, for more than two decades."

"I don't know that I've ever thought about this conversation before. I don't think about things that happened to me in college that often, it's like memory."

"So maybe it doesn't get me anywhere. Fuck it. I'm trying anyway. I can convince you now, of things you would've done then - because you'd already remember this conversation -"

"You don't, I already - we already had her."

"The hell we did, I'm trying out deciding that this is a memory and I can change the past. Louise. I loved her too. You don't think I didn't love her -"

"I know you loved her."

"But we would've loved any baby. We would've loved a son, or one we still named Hannah but conceived a week later, or one who died in a car crash so you could *so/ve* it. We didn't have to stand over a grave you saw coming eighteen years early."

"She's the one I know, I love her, she's not interchangeable. She couldn't *be* without the way she died, Ian."

"You have to lose her either way but I don't - you didn't have to do this to us, to me. Louise. We could have a different baby and stay together."

"I don't have to lose those sixteen years - our Hannah, our Hannah -"

"Won't you remember her anyway?"

"I don't know. I never try to do things I remember not doing."

"I can't pretend you'd be doing it for Hannah. If we don't have her she won't exist. But God, Louise -"

I hang up on him.

"What would you want to name your sister?" I ask you.

"A palindrome. What are more palindrome names?" You taught yourself to say the word fluidly when you first learned it.

"Anna, Ava, Ada. Elle. Eve."

When you get sick he doesn't say anything to me at all. He glares, when we run into each other at the hospital.

I never tell you why.

"You wanna make a baby?" he whispers in my ear.

"Yes," I tell your daddy. "Yes I do." I want to, I want to make you and hold you and have you. And I hold him and breathe in the scent of his skin and love him and love you and love him, so much -

And I flinch.

He catches me before I hit the ground and he's all over worry, I've never hurt him, he wouldn't think it of me.

I try to remember your face and it won't come quite clear and I black out.

I wake up in the hospital. I tell them I'm fine. I can't explain. They let me go, eventually.

Your daddy -

Your -

Ian doesn't bring up children again for a while. I go back to work.

You're gone, you're gone, you're gone, I can't ever -

I don't remember -

Just flashes. Your smile, your galoshes squelching in mud, your name.

He catches me sitting in the yard in the rain, staring at the places you like to play.

"Louise," he says. "What's wrong? You're still acting strange. Are you still sick, should we get a second opinion?"

"I'm not sick," I say. "I think. I don't know. I don't know what's happening."

He guides me inside and dries me off. "What can you tell me?" he says, toweling my hair.

"Did you ever get better at reading Heptapod?" I breathe, and I cry onto his chest.

"They called it a weapon," he says.

"If we translated that right. We didn't have enough context to be sure." My voice feels far away. I don't remember saying this. My memory is so murky now.

"Or a tool. They did say it was a gift."

"They did."

"This isn't a gift, you must be - doing it wrong, somehow, if it does this to you. It's a weapon, or a tool, it has to be usable. You have to be able to *use* it."

"I don't know how," I say.

He points me back at my work. "Then keep reading."

Eve wants to learn Heptapod. I tell her to wait until she's older, that it can be a lot to handle, that it takes time to learn to use it instead of being overwhelmed, unable to keep everything straight and still make choices.

She reads my book anyway, stares at the sea of coffee-stain marks they left us as their gift. She asks me about you; she says I tell her when she's twenty but she asks now.

I tell her when she's twenty.

"She named you," I say. "She was never made but I remembered enough that she could name you."

You would have loved her so much, if you could have ever met her. If you could have both been real.

"Anna sounds too much like my name," you say.

"It would be pretty confusing," I agree.

"I like Eve. My sister should be named Eve."

"Okay, Hannah," I say, and I tuck you in and kiss you goodnight.

Grownups

Megan should have been wearing her seatbelt. But she'd wanted to stick her head out the window, look at the cows and the mountains to have something to talk about when she started first grade -

There was a confusing redness of pain, and uncolored discontinuity, and white.

Megan swallowed. This was probably the part where she would meet her guardian angel, and she was *pretty* sure she had been good enough to get into Heaven. Lately.

Gulp.

She didn't hurt anymore, and the room was white, and she was in a white dress - her party dress, like she wore to her friends' birthdays. The floor was soft and spongy. Heaven wasn't *really* clouds, *and* clouds weren't *really* solid enough to stand on, but she jumped on it anyway. Just a couple of times. She wondered where her angel was.

The door opened and in walked a pretty lady, also in a white dress, but conspicuously missing wings, halo, and harp. "Hi, Megan," she said. "My name is Kim. How are you feeling?"

"Dead," said Megan, consideringly.

"You feel dead?" asked Kim.

"This is Heaven, right? I was mostly good," Megan said.

Kim smiled. "You've been plenty good. You're going to be fine, Megan. Apart from dead, how are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. It doesn't hurt anymore. How long do I have to wait for my mommy and daddy to be in Heaven too, please?"

"That part's sort of complicated," said Kim.

"Were they not good enough?"

"Oh, they were plenty good, too," said Kim. "They're completely all right. The trouble is... well, they've left you a letter to explain."

"Are you here to help me read it?"

"I'm here to answer questions you might have about it. It's not a written letter, so it's okay if you can't read that well yet."

"How is it a letter if it isn't made of letters?" asked Megan suspiciously.

"That's a good question. We could call it a recording instead. Are you ready to see it?"

"Okay," said Megan.

One of the white walls turned out to be a television. And there were Mommy and Daddy.

Sort of. They looked younger. And dressed up. Daddy had more hair and was maybe a little taller, and Mommy was sort of made of smoother lines, and had her left arm back again from wherever it had gone missing. But it was them, prettied up. Mommy was leaning on Daddy's shoulder, hugging his arm.

"Hello darling," murmured Mommy.

(Kim, behind Megan, sniffed softly.)

"Hi, Megan," said Daddy. "If you're watching this it's because they've finally figured out how to bring you back to life."

"There was a car crash," Mommy said. "You were very badly hurt. And you died."

"Some people who died were frozen so they'd keep," Daddy said.

Megan said, "Like waffles."

"Like waffles," Daddy said, but it was just a video, he wasn't listening. They'd just always had so many waffles in the freezer. "And eventually somebody invented a person-defroster, and then those people could be alive again."

"But *we* didn't know to do that," Mommy said. "We're so sorry, darling."

"But I'm fine," said Megan.

"Watch," advised Kim softly.

"We never, ever forgot you," Daddy said. "Every year on your birthday we'd get a box of sparklers -"

"Sparklers!" said Megan. "Are there sparklers in Heaven?"

"Yes," said Kim, and she backed up the video so Megan could hear the rest of what Daddy said.

"- and light them all and remember you. We had two more children. Your little brother's name is Ryan and your little sister's name is Amy."

"They're not here for this letter because you never knew them, but later you can watch letters from them if you like," Mommy said.

"And they grew up, and we got old, and they had kids -" Daddy began.

"And then," Mommy cut in. "Then, some very smart people figured out how to make it so people didn't have to die if they weren't already dead, and how to defrost the frozen people."

"If they're *not* dead..." Megan frowned.

Kim interrupted her. "Watch."

"It turns out," said Daddy, "that there is so much farther to grow up, if you have enough time. It's not just children and grownups. It's children and grownups and so many other things. People grow sideways and in circles and every which way."

"We're recording this," Mommy said, "because we're about to grow a little more, and if they ever figure out how to do what's called a *rescue simulation*, they'll bring you back. But we won't be enough *like you* anymore."

"If we knew for sure," Daddy said, "that they would figure out how to bring you back, then we wouldn't do it. We'd wait for you. Even if it took another thousand years. We'd let everybody else grow up and we'd wait until we could bring you along with us."

"But we don't know," Mommy said. "It might turn out to be completely impossible. Some very smart people are working on it. But they might find out that there's just no way to reach into the past and get you out of it so that you can grow up. So we're - going ahead. Growing up some more ourselves."

"And we're already not very much like how you remember us," Daddy said. "But after we've gone forward this little bit more... we could talk to you. But it would happen one of two ways. Either we'd be pretending to be less grown up, or we'd be so confusing you couldn't understand anything we said. There would be no way for you to really talk to *us* the way we're going to be."

"Not until you've grown up yourself."

"But not everyone wants to grow up at the same speed."

"And some people are deciding to stay less grown up, and if they figure out how to bring you back to life -"

"Then we've asked your niece, Kim, to look after you until you can come meet us again."

Megan looked over her shoulder at Kim. "You're my *niece* ? I can't have a niece."

"You do. I'm your brother Ryan's daughter," said Kim.

"We love you so much," Daddy's recording said.

"So much," echoed Mommy. "We can't wait to see you again, darling. But you don't need to hurry for us. We'll be keeping an eye on you and Kim. You can grow up as fast or slow as you want. And when you get here we'll be so glad to have you with us again."

The video stilled on sadly smiling faces.

Megan looked at them, then turned to Kim again. "You're my niece?"

"Hi, Aunt Megan," said Kim.

"You're going to grow me up?"

"Yep. But if you want to be six for a while first that's fine. There's no hurry."

"Do I have to go to school," asked Megan suspiciously.

Kim shook her head. "If you want to learn something, you can learn it - anything you like - but you don't have to go to school."

"Can Mommy and Daddy *visit* ?"

"It's not a question of whether they can. They could. But it wouldn't be good for you to try to talk to someone that grown up, yet, not if you want to really know them instead of just learning something from them. They'll wait."

"How can somebody be *more grown up than a grownup*?" complained Megan. "This isn't Heaven at all, is it."

"It's not. It's just being alive," said Kim.

Megan bit her lip and looked at the still television screen.

Then:

"There *are* sparklers, though?"

"All the sparklers you could ever want," said Kim, and she took Megan's hand and opened the door to a beach, black sky full of exploding colors.

Dogs

This story is also available in audio, which you may find on [this episode of Wingardcast](#).

I'd heard that Lady Clara had a lot of animals, but that had to be at least *ten* . Dogs, all of them, playing together on the grounds.

"Wasted *stars* ," I breathed. "The expense. She's not even out watching them and they're in character."

"Are you *positive* they're not robots? For that kind of money you can get very good robots," said Linly, at my elbow. She was half my height, heavily modded - this month she looked like some kind of bonsai dryad. Next month she'd be eight feet high and glow like a lamp, or wear feathers and scales.

"They're not robots. That's why we're here. Hi!" I added, calling out to the dogs. They ignored me except for briefly looking in our direction and sniffing the air. Consummate actors. The performance was spectacular; I could have been watching an old recording. "If we could afford robots we wouldn't have this problem."

"Modders are even more expensive," said Linly.

"Modders," I said, nudging her by her wooden antlers, "can be convinced to do volunteer work. And if we're very lucky we won't even have to do that, we'll just be getting a donation out of the Lady's copious biotech profits."

"We should just get someone to loan us robots -"

"The props people are working on that as backup. Our job is to see if Lady Clara will lend us time with her contractors. Hi guys!" I called to the dogs again. "Put in a good word for us!"

They went on chasing each other across the garden, tails wagging. We approached the gate.

Before we crossed the fence, we consented to an information baffle. A robot administered us quick hypos of time-stamped, dormant amnestic that Lady Clara could activate if she didn't want us to remember what happened in her estate. Some planets forbade the measure even on the privatest of property; and it *was* a little nerve-wracking. But we still had our medical monitors to freak out off-site if Lady Clara turned out to like preying on random visitors, and it was up to us whether to take the drugs or forge ahead. Lady Clara wanted her privacy in case we wandered somewhere unauthorized, and we wanted to inquire in person about a borrowing of her staff. Fair enough. I still caught myself waiting to see if my chrono jumped. It didn't.

We crossed the garden, and we were sniffed and in one case licked by the dogs as we waited at the front step to be let in.

The door opened, and the dogs flowed around us as we went in to see Lady Clara.

Lady Clara was at least three hundred years old, but pretty lightly modded considering. She even looked some fraction of her age - not like she was planning to play a wizened old hag in a drama, but there were lines on her face and hands. She was plainly attired to match. I usually felt painfully unfashionable next to Linly - only re-sexed and re-colored, nothing dramatic or frequently revised - but Lady Clara made me feel overdressed. But the dog that hopped up on the couch next to her and put their head on her lap spoke of more means than it would have taken to turn myself into a centaur and back.

"Welcome," Clara said, when we'd sat opposite her. "I hear you want to talk about the dogs."

"That's right," I said. "We're from the Historical Society of Greater Saint Brian Metropolitan Area and we're putting on an educational about the Last Extinction. It'll be seen through the whole system, maybe the whole sprawl!"

"And you want to borrow my dogs?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am. We have actors volunteering who'll do all the scripted parts, already, but they aren't trained to act, well, naturally. We want the production to be really slick, you know? Realistic animals."

"We'd want to remod a couple of them, and we can cover that, and the mod back," said Linly. "Especially if any of you have already practiced modding as birds," she added to the assembled dogs, though of course they wouldn't be able to reply in their state.

"I don't think any of them have," Lady Clara said, sounding faintly amused.

"We can work around it if they can't fly," I cut in. "We can get someone who knows flying to stunt double, I think we can edit that convincingly enough. The problem is that actors who normally act the parts of *people* come across as slightly fake when they do animals, and we want it to ring true. We want viewers to almost *miss* dogs and birds and things."

"Do *you* miss dogs and birds and things?" wondered Lady Clara. She snapped her fingers and a robot servant brought a tray of snacks and lemonade.

"We're not old enough to miss them," I said. "We'd love to have you consult, though, or even interview, if you remember the real thing and want to tell us about it."

"I think everyone should miss dogs just the same, regardless of how old you are," Lady Clara said, pouring herself a lemonade. She fed the dog in her lap a tidbit of sausage. They ate it right out of her

hand. "We evolved together with them, you know. They're why we don't smell very well."

"We know," said Linly. "We've done our research."

"Since the parts are unscripted, improv, we'd only want to borrow the actors for a few days," I said. "We might be able to *partially* compensate you for the gaps in their employment if some other budget matters go well, but - not all the way. We're hoping that since you're known to be passionately interested in animals you'll want our production to succeed."

"It's an interesting proposal," said Lady Clara. "Go ahead, help yourself to the food - what's the general outline?"

"It's a broad educational production," Linly said, and her eyes adopted the glassy look of peering at her notes. I grabbed a little sandwich. "We're covering what animals were, some of the things they used to do that interacted with people. Just brief digressions into how we used to make meat and fur and stuff, and the deceptive innocence of pet-keeping - and the dog evolution fact, that too, all the things they taught us about biology and ecology. And wild animals and the ways they were always under so much evolutionary pressure, killing them in droves. We're going to try not to be too intense for squeamish people though."

She paused to grab a sandwich of her own, and I picked up: "Then there's the sad bit about how animals weren't very smart but they were complex enough to suffer, except maybe insects and so on but probably them too. We've got a long segment about the Extinction War, we had some editorial infighting about how much of that to cover but we've come to a firm agreement. And then the Extinction itself, it was way more complicated to implement than most people know because some of the reproductive systems worked so differently, did you know we actually still *have* sponges, a few, in the Earth oceans, and those are technically animals? They're pretty sure

they're more like plants in capacity for suffering - anyway, and there was resistance to the very end - even after."

"For a surprisingly long time. Mostly pets," Linly said, "and some decorative and research interests, all the food uses were long replaced - mostly pets."

"We actually secured an interview with someone who was keeping parrots in his basement for years after the Extinction was mostly wrapped up in the wild," I mentioned. "Cloned them by himself. He got caught, but not before he condemned three more animals to living out lives of suffering without insight."

"There's some debate about parrots," Linly corrected. "And their level of insight."

"They never got smart enough to reflect on what might be bothering them if anything did and solve the problems systematically and consistently," I said. "Or to communicate as peers with human adults. They were crippled, as minds, to the point of -"

"I'm not saying that it's okay to clone parrots in your basement," Linly said. "Just that the insight line is more likely to go over a clip of mice than a clip of parrots."

"Is anyone being a parrot for the gentleman you found?" wondered Lady Clara distantly. "So that he doesn't have to miss them completely?"

"I don't think he can afford a full-timer," I said. "Let alone the, how many of you guys being dogs are there, a dozen? But we found him through an animal-mods hobbyist group, so he probably gets to hang out with people who are modding birds occasionally even if they're not acting the part or in his employ."

"Eleven," said Lady Clara. "Eleven dogs."

"You all look very enthusiastic about your work," Linly said politely to the dogs.

"You'll never find more dedicated," said Lady Clara.

"Do you think you can offer them their usual rates for a few days of participating in our educational?" I asked.

"Mm. I'm not sure. Is there a political slant to it?" asked Lady Clara.

"A political slant?" Linly said. "It's about animals. You know, the last vast well of pain. The educational's going to have a warning on it."

"The parrots fellow, he's not a holdout or anything?"

"He comes off a little nostalgic," I admitted. "But not some kind of apologist or revivalist. Nobody would be caught on record in this day and age saying they want creatures with senses and rudimentary minds to exist in meaningless misery for their intellectual stimulation or sensory pleasure or whatever. Let alone for food, we had to dig way deeper in history to find people defending that."

"I see," sighed Lady Clara.

"So about the dogs..." I said.

"I don't believe I will loan you my dogs."

She couldn't have them under *too* tight a contract. People who wanted to mod dogs and then play the part full-time were not so common that they couldn't negotiate for good employment conditions. "Any of you want to skip out on your boss?" I asked the dogs.

A golden-haired one scratched their ear. A spotty brown one yawned.

"Loyal," commented Linly.

"You'll never find more loyal," murmured Lady Clara.

I blinked.

"You can pet them," she added, "if you like."

Linly reached for a curly white dog. Their tail wagged.

...Its tail. Its tail wagged.

"Are these," I said, "real dogs?"

Linly stopped cold, hand poised over the dog's head.

Lady Clara stroked the one in her lap. It adjusted position slightly, closed its eyes.

"The information baffle," I said.

"Yes," sighed Lady Clara. "The information baffle. Is there any point to telling you?"

"You have real - *real* dogs - eleven of them - you can't even get them medical care -" Linly spluttered. "If one of them gets hurt, oh stars, it'll just, it'll just hurt, it won't know why or be able to fix it - you can't, you can't -"

"They don't understand anything," I whispered. "They can't communicate, all you know is whether they wag or -"

"I didn't think so," said Lady Clara. "No, of course not. You've never wanted to talk to something with more personality to it than a robot but less judgment than a person, you've never wanted to care for something with more complexity than a houseplant but less agency than an employee, of course you've never met a *puppy* and wanted one with all your heart -"

"We don't have to meet puppies to know what you're doing is wrong!" shrilled Linly.

"I *am* a doctor," said Lady Clara. "I'm in biotech now, but I used to be a veterinarian. I can take care of my dogs."

"They shouldn't *be* ! They never chose to be, they have no choice now, if one wanted to die how would you *know* -" I exclaimed, watching one fall asleep on the rug. Dogs could dream, I remembered that from the research we'd done they could dream, if it had a nightmare it would never fully understand that whatever it feared was fake. If it had a good dream it would never have had a chance to write it down or tell its equally stunted friends. Nothing good was preserved and nothing bad had context and -

"I'll spare you the revivalist speech," said Lady Clara. "We'll come to no agreement. Why don't you let yourselves out? If you don't..." Her hand moved across her lapdog's back. The dog might love her or hate her but it didn't matter because she would never, ever let it go, and would have tamed it into submission and conditioned it to show all the signals of affection she wanted with her complete control over its food supply - "My dogs are very well trained."

If she told them to, they would do violence without any ability to know what cause they furthered. They'd savage us without empathy for the pain or even genuine malice to motivate the attacks. Our medical monitors would only show the bite, not that a *real* dog had bitten; and we wouldn't remember; and Lady Clara would explain on her employee's behalf that it was a misunderstanding of some kind -

Linly sobbed. I grabbed her hand and squeezed.

"Go," Lady Clara said.

We went.

My chrono jumped. Linly squeaked.

"Damn, that's creepy," I said. "What happened, did you wander into her library or something?"

"How should I know?" Linly asked. "Why do you think it was me? Maybe you decided to read her diary."

"I didn't - damn," I repeated, sighing. The dogs were inside the house, now, no chance of talking one into an under-the-table deal through the fence. "Let's hope the props people had better luck."

"Do you suppose it's fun, being a dog?" Linly wondered.

"They must get something out of it or they'd mod back," I said.

"Yeah," Linly agreed, "I guess."

Mana

This story is a sequel to [Water](#).

Sanuar

"Again," said the Sixth Archmage. "Faster."

Sanuar tried to paint the bead paper faster. Straight thin line straight thick line, grab the size-two 4:1-spaced comb, put it down on the right with the teeth facing left so it doesn't smudge the wet ink, paint, put the comb aside but don't fling it because it comes up in this bead later, straight thin line, remember to put mana into the lines gently gently slow constant trickle -

His hand twitched. The ink jumped out of line. The edges of the bead paper crisped up; even if Sanuar trimmed off all the ink he'd put down so far and started a new bead spell that didn't require this much space, the whole sheet was ruined.

The Sixth Archmage, His Learned Excellency Golar Absam, slammed his fist down on the worktable; dozens of combs for dotted lines leapt with the impact. "Faster does not mean *clumsier*, Vayar!"

"I'm sorry," said Sanuar. "I'm sorry, sir, I'll start over."

"You've wasted enough bead paper for the day. Do I look like I'm made of the stuff? Go and meditate with your bowl of water while I think of something *easier* for you to do," sneered Absam. "At this rate by the time you have to choose secondaries you won't have enough control over your mana to keep even one of them in good order. This with a soft specialty! If I were you I'd drop out and sell mana spots for a living, but I suppose your learned parents won't

hear of it. How did an archmage turn out such a useless -" Absam shook his head. "Go meditate with your bowl of water."

Sanuar lurched in the direction of his meditation cushion and collapsed onto it, then tried to compose himself into a good-enough posture so that Absam wouldn't be moved to cross the room and smack him on the shoulder with one of the combs.

Water. Water. *Your favorite thing*, he tried to remind his mana, but its initial excitement when he'd imprinted it had faded, since. It would probably take him four or five years to get back the simple ease he'd had the first day. It had been pretty awkward just covering for the "early" dropoff when his parents were under the impression that he'd been a mage for six hours instead of twelve.

Water, water, waaaaaaaater.

It was sort of hard to meditate when he was expecting his teacher to hit him.

Counterproductive as that was.

Water -

"I don't sense a trance over there!" snapped Absam.

Sanuar flinched. "I'm sorry sir, I'll get it in just a minute, I'm sure."

"If you can't meditate, your mana will fall out of order. If your mana falls out of order, you won't be able to use it," said Absam. "If you can't use your mana you're no mage at all! *Concentrate on your water!* It's your own idiot decision that you didn't choose something easier to focus on! Not that *you'd* surprise me if you couldn't keep your attention on a candle or even a *pendulum* ."

"Yes sir I'm sorry sir."

Absam growled, but he didn't snatch up a comb to swat Sanuar's shoulder with, just went over to where his other student, Tasnan Arol, was meditating on his prism to shake him out of it and teach him something. Sanuar would have a reprieve as long as Tasnan was occupied, at least until Absam wanted them to do something simultaneously.

Water. Water.

Oh, finally, blissfully, *trance* .

The water was clear and clean and room-temperature. The water was still. The water was not going to hurt him.

Sanuar felt like he was floating. Or not even floating - underwater, neither sinking nor rising, untouched by currents. Weightless.

He wasn't sure how long it had been when Absam's hand came down on his head. Felt like an hour or so of settling and regeneration in his mana. "Vayar," said his teacher. "Help Arol with his spell beads. Pass him combs, roll the paper for him when he's done. You're both off for the day once he's made and cut one good roll of them. If you mess them up for him I've told him to strike you blind and send you home like that for your learned lady mother to fix, don't let your excuse for a mind wander, Vayar."

"Yes sir," said Sanuar, swallowing.

And Absam left the room, leaving the boys alone. Sanuar tripped his way to the spell bead table, and looked at the instructions for the spell. It needed a lot of different combs. Were they all organized? They were all organized, good.

"I won't strike you blind," Tasnan remarked, laying out a clean paper, "if you promise to say I did, if it comes to it."

"Okay. I mean yes. Thank you."

"But it'd be better if you didn't have to and the beads were right on the first try."

"Yes. I'll, I'll try."

Sanuar managed to pass Tasnan all the correct combs in the correct order so that Tasnan could paint the correct dotted lines. When he placed the final stroke Sanuar rolled up the paper around a thin dowel as tightly and quickly as possible, dipped it in shellac and then drying powder, and offered it back to Tasnan to be sliced into several smaller copies of the same spell. Some mages could paint mana onto a paper quickly enough that they could make even a long spell on a tall sheet of paper and be done before the magic seeped out of the first line, and cut a single paintjob into a dozen copies of a bead. Tasnan had only been a mage for a few months longer than Sanuar, and his roll made four. Slice, slice, slice.

"What does it do?" Sanuar asked, as Tasnan picked up the least attractive end piece to test.

"Sunburst. Close your eyes," said Tasnan.

Sanuar did it just in time to avoid the explosion of light when Tasnan cast the bead. "There, all done for the day," Tasnan said brightly.

"Isn't this a bit early for him to be letting us go?" asked Sanuar. That was some consolation. He might get home in time to see Niomah before she finished all her work and left for the day.

"Nah," said Tasnan. "Did you lose track of time? It's about dinnertime. I'm starving. Do you want to grab food at the Broadleaf? Pick up girls?"

"I told you I have a girlfriend." Two.

"Liar. Come on, you'll be fine if you can get over being so shy, you're, you know, tall."

"I still have a girlfriend." *Sorry, whichever of you I'm leaving out.*

"Whatever. You're taller than me, come to think, you'd probably be more distraction than wingman. Go have fun with your imaginary girlfriend," Tasnan snorted.

I can't. Niomah's on her way home already and Ens is at that... thing. "Will do."

Sanuar, mercifully not struck blind, went home to his parents, and ate dinner, and reported in a mumble that not much had happened in his lessons today.

He wrote Ens a telegram and left Niomah a note under his pillow for when she changed the linens. Both completely innocuous - the note for Niomah worded to look like it could have been a note to self - lest someone else see.

Ens

"- seven years later. At this time there was a substantial uptick in immigration from Arnland into Gathland and neighboring countries," said the history teacher.

To be perfectly fair it was a nice school. They had teachers who knew what they were talking about, and decent books, and a pleasant campus. Ens just hated her uniform and the early start time and the mindboggling number of hours they wanted her to sink into acquiring her appropriately genteel education. She'd multiplied it out once and imagined spending that much time doing *anything else* .

"The low educational level, tendency to criminality, and crude cultural practices of first-generation Arnysh immigrants led to a negative reaction from the host countries, with most implementing a quota and the lake nations electing to ban them entirely starting two years after the regime change," said the teacher.

...Well, the other teachers knew what they were talking about. Ens charitably supposed this one likely had the *dates* right.

"Lord Riawae?" said the teacher.

"Um?" said Ens. "I mean, yes?"

"Do you find something objectionable about the history of Arnland/Mainland relations?"

"I." Could probably afford to piss off this teacher this once, but would it *be* once? Not if she opened her big mouth it wouldn't be. "No ma'am."

"I didn't think so." She went back to pacing the front of the room. "Many Arnysh elected to immigrate illegally in defiance of these attempts to reduce the numbers of entrants, which is why Arnysh are now required to carry identification in four countries including -"

Ens tried not to look like she'd bitten directly into a lemon. She took notes. She made little star markings next to things she wanted to ask Niomah about. Not that she was likely to get a chance in the next forever. School meant she usually couldn't visit Sanuar; when *Ens* was free he usually wasn't. And Niomah was completely at the mercy of her work schedule. Ens had a school break in a couple of weeks, Sanuar had one day off then. If Ens were very, very lucky, no high-society parties would claim her time on that one day and she could go see "her friend".

She missed Sanuar too, but him at least she could telegram. Niomah didn't even dare receive letters at home. Very angry father.

"- the patriarchal and collectivist society of the Arnysh inspires moral outrage in most Gathru. Arnysh families subsume the wills of individuals into the ostensible good of the family, usually decided by the most dominant male relative in a household, which may contain upwards of a dozen individuals in some cases, typically in extremely

cramped living quarters. By contrast Gath see it as the responsibility of a parent to have a number of children to whom they can devote more individual attention and then help those children develop their full potential."

Yep. Sure. If Ens and Niomah wanted to get married, Niomah's family would be the only ones complaining. Or rather, Ens's family would complain that Ens was not living up to her potential, while Niomah's family would be appalled at the implication that she'd had a social life.

Okay, maybe this teacher knew *something* about Arnysh culture.

But she didn't know anything about Niomah.

Ens regretted every single solitary minute she had spent during her long vacation doing things other than listening to Niomah call her *priceless artwork* and letting Sanuar muss up her hair with petting.

She did not have enough happy memories to get through the rest of this term without *eventually* spending all her Lord Riawae Points on pissing off teachers.

" *Lord Riawae* ," said the teacher.

"Yes?"

"Eyes front, please. This is not introductory school and I should not have to cavort with brightly colored puppets for your attention."

"Yes ma'am."

History, eventually, after a break for lunch and a digression into the relevance of sugarcane and Arnysh magecraft, came to an end. Ens had art (the pleasantest class of the day) and math, and that was all; the next day would be literature and music and ethics, and after that natural philosophy and rhetoric and Trathese. (Because they

didn't offer Arnysh, because why would rich Mainlanders want to learn Arnysh.)

(Ens imagined if one of her significant others could only tell her they loved her *in Trathese* . She could understand it pretty well, but there wasn't any *emotion* in her second language, not with the gap between hearing the word and remembering what it meant. She resolved that she was going to find some way to figure out how to tell Niomah she loved her, in *Arnysh* , before they next saw each other.)

Math let out. Ens went to wait for the family driver to bring him home. There was a girl from the class behind his standing nearby, smiling at him. He smiled back, just a little bit. No point in being rude.

"Hello, Lord Riawae."

Ens looked at the emblem on her school badge. "Lady Indabar. Hello."

"Please, call me Kizi."

"If you like."

"May I call you Ens?"

"I don't see why not."

"Oh, good. I did hope we'd get off on the right foot," smiled Kizi.

"I - what?"

"Oh! Oh, you weren't told? I apologize, that must have seemed very abrupt, forgive me. My mother's been talking to yours -"

And the rest of Lady Kizi Indabar's no-doubt-exquisitely-polite explanation was somewhat abandoned in the static of *what no no no*

fuck no no that swallowed Ens's brain.

He managed to recover the ability to process language when Kizi said "- but I do hope we can at least be friends, even if it isn't a love match?"

No no no no no

Ens swallowed. Kizi looked concerned. "Ens?" she prompted.

"Pardon me," breathed Ens. "I hadn't been told. I'm. I'm very surprised. I'd been hoping for... I hope you will not be offended if I say I'd been holding out hope for a love match."

"Oh, I'm not offended - I mean, unless you had someone in mind. It would be a *little* gauche if your mother were making promises on your behalf and you were, what's that line from the play? Taken in your...?"

"Spoken for in my heart," murmured Ens. He'd done makeup for a production of the play in question. The lead actress was always very passionate about declaring herself spoken for in her heart. She'd had to marry the villain anyway at the end of act two, although then further shenanigans ensued that left him dead. Ens did not want to have to wish Kizi dead. She seemed perfectly nice.

"Yes. It's not that, is it? I can apply to my mother about it if so. But you know that arrangements quite often develop into something more, if given a chance. I'm optimistic, myself."

Yes I have a girlfriend and a boyfriend and one's an impoverished Arnysh immigrant and one's the Fourteenth Archmage's son and I haven't seen either of them in two weeks but tell your mother I am scandalous and unmarriageable and probably insufficiently virginal oh I wish. Apply to your mother about it, Lady Indabar.

"Nothing to the point at which I would have informed Mother," Ens said softly.

Kizi patted his shoulder familiarly. "I'm supposed to go home with you today," she said. "To get to know one another better. If I'm really awful surely you can talk to your mother, likewise."

Sure I can. My mother's great about that sort of thing. I tell her everything. Of course.

Ens just nodded. Kizi smiled.

Niomah

Niomah swept. Niomah mopped, dusted, and scrubbed. Niomah put things away where they belonged. Niomah arranged flowers in a vase on the dinner table, drew the curtains against the evening sun, and took her jug of water from the cook because hauling it on a trip she was going to make anyway was better than making somebody make that one extra hike to the Timrar fountain.

Niomah missed her lost boy and her priceless artwork.

Niomah missed sleeping in the garden shed, mercy be. But she couldn't risk angering The Learned Sanuar's Parents anymore after the lockdown on the ghetto ended and the Our Boys (as her grandfather insisted on calling them) had been arrested and she could get back in.

And be hollered at for disappearing like that, for letting them think she'd been killed kidnapped defiled disappeared. Joy. They cared ever so, certainly.

But they were all alive, even if they had had to break into the savings to have Niomah's sister-in-law seen by the life-mage crone down the street to be sure she wouldn't miscarry from stress and

dehydration. So expensive. They wanted to fix the little one's eye, but the pregnant sister-in-law came first. Due any day now. Possibly in labor as Niomah walked home, that would be something.

Well, she just had to keep going to work even if her lost boy was never there to gaze adoringly anymore, never there to twirl her into his arms and sneak a feel of her curves and kiss her, never there to so much as say hello. Gone by the time she arrived. Still at his magic lessons when she was all out of house to clean, all out of ways to stretch into another hour for the extra eleven balances.

Keep working, bring home the money and the water, save up, fix the brother's eye, make sure there was plenty to accommodate the new baby, be around to translate Gath paperwork and regulations and this-and-that for her relations. Keep working and everything would be fine. Her boys would be out of school *some, eventually*. Their teachers could not keep them forever. How much could there really be to learn? They both already spoke very good Gath, obviously, they knew their sums and civics, that was all anyone cared if *she* knew.

And she wasn't a mage and she'd never held more than five hundred balances in her hands all at once, so what did anyone care if she knew anything.

She had to detour around the place the bridge had once been. There were talks of building a new one which looked likely to be endlessly delayed (who wanted a bridge into the *Arnysh ghetto*? The *Arnysh* people? *They* could go around) so Niomah went six blocks west. There, the chasm the bridge had arced over narrowed some, and there were stairs cut into it. Niomah could either go all the way down, or go about a third of the way down and try to jump it. She jumped on the way to work in the morning; with the jug of water she descended to the bottom and then climbed until her knees whined.

At least she didn't go to work in any kind of vehicle. That would have obliged her to go around the canyon *completely*, halfway across town.

Stairs and screaming calves, stairs and aching thighs. Stairs and some boy, Mainlander but the scruffy kind who sometimes hung around in low-rent areas, standing at the top.

"Hey," he said. "That looks heavy."

"Is actually made of soap bubble," said Niomah, "am practicing for theatrical showing, but many thanks for observation."

The boy laughed, showing all his teeth. "Lemme carry it for you the rest of the way."

Niomah had a blister on the back of her ankle. "Terribly kind," she said, and she handed him the jug of water and trudged past the chasm into the ghetto.

"What's your name?"

"Niomah."

"Niomah who?"

"Mihi." Belatedly: "Why?"

"Just being friendly. I'm Hesh, Hesh Linnar."

"How nice of a name."

"I've seen you come through here before."

"Yes, well. Bridge has not grown back yet." In the nice parts of town there was always construction, which was very annoying, but not as annoying as the sluggish repairs on things in the ghetto. Sure, there was no scaffolding in her way. But there was a broken window over

there and a bent fence over there and graffiti on *everything* because who cared?

Hesh laughed again. "Are you actually funny or do you talk like that because you don't know enough Gath?"

Niomah bit her lip. She turned the corner onto her street. "Very ignorant. Wait five years for polishing accent and so boring, never laughing ever." That also got a laugh. Her skin crawled. "Almost home. Water, please."

"I can carry it the rest of the way. You look tired."

"Oh, very angry father, seeing strange boy."

"I know your grandpa. There's a Mr. Mihi at the liquor store. He knows me."

Oh joy of joys, liquor store regular following her home. "Perhaps no relation. Such common name. Water now, please."

"At least let me take it up the stairs to your floor."

What was her mama said? Say no twice, nice and mannerly, and after that you only go on doing it if you hate them and want it mutual. "So kind," Niomah said.

There was her building. There were the stairs up the side of it to the balcony with the four doors to apartments. She managed to wave Hesh away before he offered to hold her own front door for her or some such fool thing, smiling all the while, but she could feel his eyes on her while she took her key out of her pocket and let herself into 4-2.

Perhaps he was really only friendly, really only helpful.

Niomah tested the water in the shower and it smelled like rotten eggs. None of that, then. She would need to think of something else to feel better. Such a pity she could not write to her priceless artwork (the mail would be seen, could not be accounted for) nor back to her lost boy (he could leave her little notes; but the maid could not very well be seen leaving debris around the house, that being the opposite of her job).

Her sister-in-law had no shortage of chores for Niomah to do to distract her, though, and however little affection Niomah bore her sister-in-law, she did already love that baby she was going to have. Baby baby baby.

And the sister-in-law went into labor that evening and everyone was up all night listening to her holler, and just before dawn there was finally Niomah's little niece new in the world. Niomah held her and kissed her for just a moment before she had to scurry off to work, early early early to leave time for the six block detour and the trip down and up the stairs, to a house from which her lost boy was missing to dust the frames of artwork that were not her priceless one.

Ens

Kizi was perfectly nice and Ens couldn't stand it.

She was interested in his makeup hobby; she wanted him to paint her and went around grinning into every reflective surface until she went home. She liked theater and could hold an intelligent conversation about that too.

Her family owned chunks of the Arnysh ghetto and the Behadze neighborhood and she sounded *almost not racist* when she talked about that. She seemed genuinely sympathetic to the tenants who didn't like the Mainlander property managers her parents kept hiring at a ridiculous turnover rate.

She gave absolutely no indication that she would enjoy shoving Ens against a wall and nibbling on him.

If Ens had never met anybody who wanted to do that, he probably would have liked Kizi very well. He probably would have been ecstatic that his mother had had the wit to find this pleasant girl near his own age with compatible interests instead of some fourteen-year-old twit he'd have to wait forever to even *consider* touching or some insufferable new-money who only thought about calligraphy and horse racing. Ens had been threatened with an example of each, before, in probable jest.

Kizi was perfectly nice. She was *good company* .

She was... amenable.

Optimistic.

She wasn't even bad-looking. Especially not after Ens did her makeup; he could get practically anyone past "plain" into "fetching". She was sort of shapeless, but that was just Ens looking for reasons to be picky besides just:

She didn't want to be here.

She didn't seem to have, as Ens had, somewhere else she'd rather be; she was not *actively unhappy* about any part of the situation. But she didn't look at Ens like she wanted to lick his throat or wrap her entire body around his or lace her fingers through his hair. There was literally zero attraction. And Ens had watched Sanuar look at him. Mercy and grace he'd watched *Niomah* look at him.

Ens could have tolerated Sanuar and Niomah getting each other to themselves while Ens saw to concerns of familial approval and converging dynasties - if it didn't mean never being looked at like that, ever again.

But Ens didn't know what to *do* . She'd gotten a barely legible telegram from Niomah one time when she'd idly sent a message to Sanuar's house though Sanuar was out: *hi ttwrok plegse tlgramm samuaar beek ltsr that my nees ws born cmnt leive nute herz* , it said. Characteristic of somebody whose Gath wasn't that great to begin with trying to figure out the code, unable to see the letters as they came out incorrectly on the other side. This was the only news she'd had from her in weeks.

Dutifully, that evening Ens typed back: *Please give the telegrammer to Sanuar.*

It's me.

Niomah sent earlier what I think was supposed to be "hi artwork please telegram Sanuar back later that my niece was born can't leave note here".

Oh, that's good! Sometimes I get bits and pieces from the cook, Niomah was worried about that.

My mother wants me to marry Lady Kizi Indabar.

Long pause. *Long* pause. Ens sat on her hands so she wouldn't bite her nails. Was he going to suggest that this sounded like an excellent idea and by the way I've been wondering how to tell you this but I'm tired of you? Was he going to say that Ens had better withdraw her entire year's worth of spending money in cash and elope with Niomah and deal with the great yawning void of incomprehensible nothing that loomed after it whenever Ens considered this option? Was he going to say *so how does Lady Indabar feel about straws and chocolate milk ?*

Which would be nice to know in theory. If she actually wanted Ens, if Ens actually wanted her.

The reply, when it came, was *How are you doing about that?*

I'd like her fine if it weren't for you and Niomah.

I mean, pause. There's an and in there.

She's nice but there's no anything. She's nice but I don't dare tell her.

Tell her?

You, Niomah, being sometimes a girl.

Oh. Yeah. I'm sorry, I don't think I have any advice, I don't know.

Relief and despair all at once. Sanuar would not be telling her to do any of the horrible options that existed. Sanuar would not be relieving her of the burden of agency. What was she going to *do* ?

Can I come visit sometime? Do you have any days off? she tapped.

Don't you have school?

I'll fake sick. I'll fake sick and pile pillows in my bed and sneak out and walk all the way there if you have a day off.

I think I'm actually sick. I'm sorry.

You are? With what? Are you okay? demanded Ens, alarmed.

I could be actually sick enough to stay home and you could come see Niomah at least if you need to that much?

Are you okay are you okay

I'm fine, I just keep losing track of time and feeling tired.

I love you. Go to a life mage if you need it.

My teacher has a life secondary and he says it's from ever being expected to show discipline for once in my life.

Ugh.

I'm okay it's not that bad. I can leave little notes for Niomah if I phrase them vaguely, do you want me to put anything in for you?

The thing about Kizi I guess. That I told you about her niece. That I love her. I love you too.

Love you. Father wants the telegrammer sorry

So Ens bundled up all the tape and shredded it and put the telegrammer back where it lived and flopped into her bed and stared at the ceiling.

Sanuar

"Mother?" said Sanuar softly at breakfast one morning.

"Mm?"

"Can - I change my mind about having you teach me? Or Father. Father would be fine."

"You were very emphatic that you wanted to be taught by someone you weren't related to, Sanuar. I offered three times."

"I know. I'm sorry. I think I made a mistake." He'd been smothered in parental expectations that he learn magic for his entire life. He hadn't wanted to see what they were like once he was actually in progress. But at least his parents wouldn't hit him. They would probably not insult him nearly so often. His mother had actually been fairly gentle about the "soft" water specialization. It sounded

practically idyllic now to sit in *her* office and listen to *her* advise him on painting beads and meditating and the efficient use of mana.

"We can hardly pull you out now. It would insult the Sixth Archmage. Besides, neither your father nor I does water and he at least His Learned Excellency has it as a secondary," said Mother.

"Isn't there any way -?"

"Honestly, Sanuar, what's going *on* ? Why the sudden about-face? You know the Sixth Archmage is very well-respected. He's written excellent books and it's really somewhat unusual that he'll take apprentices from outside his family at all."

What was he supposed to say? I'm tired. I'm occasionally swatted with bead-painting combs, which stings quite a bit even though it leaves no marks you could check. I don't know what happened to yesterday morning, I started meditating and then it was lunch and I couldn't remember what was going on and my mana was still so out of order it was like I hadn't even begun.

"Never mind," Sanuar murmured.

"Of course you're having a difficult time, you're late-onset," tutted Mother. "You'll find your niche eventually. Go on, work hard. Have some fun."

"Yes Mother."

So Sanuar went to his lessons and half the day disappeared into his bowl of water, but he did manage to make a spell bead roll of four correctly. It was the same general water control spell he'd stolen from his birthday present when he and Ens had broken into the plumbing exchange, and he owed Father two of the slices to pay him back for that stunt. One went to pick up his meditation water and make it do a lap through the air around the room and settle back in

its bowl, to prove that the bead was done right. But one he got to keep or sell.

There was a bead store next door to the mages' tower. Sanuar went in with his last, precious bead, and the shopkeeper gave him six hundred seventy-five balances for it and dropped it into the inventory.

Six hundred and seventy-five balances was a lot of money. He'd need to sink more of it into paper and ink, since now that he'd pulled off a bead it was no longer a pure educational expense but rather a resource investment he could pay for on his own - but it was a lot of money even after he handed back fifty balances for a bottle of ink and pack of ten short-length four-width papers.

If he could get it right on anything like a regular basis he could make *so much* money.

He could save up enough to buy a little house and an enormous bed and then he could whisk Niomah and Ens both away and they could all live in it and he could spend a few hours a day painting beads and a few more putting his mana in order and to hell with his teacher and all of their parents.

To hell with Niomah's very angry father, to hell with Lady Kizi Indabar, to *hell* with His Learned Excellency The Sixth Archmage Golar Absam. Sanuar would teach himself to make a small array of beads, out of books, and he would support his girlfriends on it and so what if he was never archmage material.

Sanuar was feeling rather chipper about this when he went back up in the tower and found Tasnan working on a bead of his own. Absam was off somewhere, mercifully enough.

Since the desk was occupied Sanuar couldn't make another go at a second bead roll right away; he sat down at his water instead. Putting his mana in order. Using it disturbed its structure, like

shaking a bottle of layers of colored sand; letting it settle by not touching it made it *cranky*, in addition to taking months or years; meditating smoothed it out. In theory if Sanuar did nothing but meditate for a week he could get his mana into the state of perfect order it had started in when he'd woken it up and imprinted it, but for most practical purposes he just needed to get better at using it from a more maintainable level of mild disarray.

Plus, meditating felt nice. It was like all and only the good parts of sleep. (Tasnan had disputed this description; Tasnan, it seemed, had pleasanter dreams than Sanuar.)

He concentrated on the weightless, restful sensation of the water for a solid half-hour, then opened his eyes again. Tasnan was done. Absam was still out. And Sanuar actually felt like he'd been meditating for thirty minutes. Maybe he was just better at meditating when he wasn't freaking out about the possibility that a comb would swat him on the arm.

"Do you *really* have a girlfriend?" asked Tasnan, looking up wistfully from his textbook on applications of perception magic.

"Yes." *Two. Two and I'm going to get us all out of our houses and make beads to keep us all three in a little cottage somewhere because whatever Absam thinks of my talent, with decent luck and a steady hand I can make a bead in four minutes that the shop next door will buy for more than Niomah makes in a week.*

"How'd you meet her?"

"In a bar." If for some reason Tasnan decided to talk to Sanuar's parents and spread rumors and Sanuar couldn't think of anything better he could say he was making it all up to impress his co-prentice.

"Yeah? How'd you convince her to go out with you?"

"It's... complicated." Was it ever.

"I keep striking out. It's lonely, I don't mind telling you that. I want a girlfriend. Hell, I want to get married," said Tasnan. "Do you want to get married?"

"That would. Also be complicated."

"Well, I do. Give me some advice. That isn't 'be tall'."

"I don't think being tall has anything to do with it, really. I don't know though. Uh, she approached me, first."

"Lucky bastard."

Sanuar spread one of his new bead papers out on the desk and picked up a paintbrush and the first comb. "Sometimes."

Niomah

The baby was adorable. The baby was loud. The baby was expensive.

I want to make enough beads to buy a house and then you and Ens can move in with me, said the note under Sanuar's pillow.

She could not write back. She did not happen to wander by the Vayars' telegrapher when Ens was writing in again. Finally, finally the Sixth Archmage had his wedding anniversary and Sanuar was home, all day. Some of it he spent staring into a bowl of water, some of it she spent actually doing her job, but in between they could talk.

"Cannot leave home," Niomah told him. "New baby, little brother still with bad eye, grandfather sick, cannot *leave*."

"I could give you more money," Sanuar said. "I could double it, easy -"

"No," said Niomah, "have to *explain* money. Suddenly come home with thousand balances father thinks precious daughter whoring for cash."

"It's not - it's a minute's work, and some meditation to make up the mana ordering, it's not just because - we aren't even -"

"Thinks precious daughter whoring for cash, is not far wrong," said Niomah severely. "Not offering beads money to neighbor down street from me, not offering beads to homeless Behadze, offering beads to *me* ."

"I want you to be able to leave," pleaded Sanuar. "If it's money, if it's keeping your income for your family -"

"- is for little niece to know me growing up, is for father not thinking I am good as dead, is for mother knowing I have place to be all day am not turning *delinquent* like brother fired from job months ago -"

"- are you happy?"

Niomah pursed her lips. "Other things *exist* ."

"Besides being happy?"

" Yes besides being happy."

"So - you're not."

"Will be so happy when lost boy finds himself and wonders what useless girlfriend is for?" Niomah snapped. "Will be *so happy* when cleaning little cottage instead of here not being paid besides in rent and groceries then suddenly rich Mainlander boys losing interest. *Happens* , rich Mainlander boys losing interest. Not *you* , lost boy. But rich powerful water mage cannot remember being lost, *him* , cannot remember the point of *me* ."

"You - you think I'd - Niomah I *wouldn't* -"

"Job is for having money to keep for *working* ," Niomah said softly. "Money to keep for showing up cleaning things going home to family. If I lose job my family will help me. If I lose you and you are what is feeding me, *only thing* feeding me, family all lost forgotten hating me?"

Sanuar was silent. Niomah lifted the edge of his bedspread and swept debris out from under it.

"I wouldn't," he said, softer.

" *You* wouldn't. Rich powerful mage, though, going to make real promises?"

"What, do you - what do you want to do, get *married* ?"

She felt her lip trembling and turned away. "But priceless artwork."

"Yeah," murmured Sanuar.

"Most priceless of artworks cannot remember how priceless without price tag," sighed Niomah. "Forget how priceless like *that* ," she snapped her fingers, "if being extra..."

"She would, wouldn't she."

"Yes."

"So you want to just - do this, forever? Just like we have been."

"Do I look so all-knowing!" exclaimed Niomah. "Oh lost boy, I only know what we *cannot* do."

She swept the heap of dust out of his room and into the hallway and Sanuar didn't follow her.

Ens

Ens turned seventeen.

She managed to finagle a sufficiently formal invitation to Sanuar that his parents let him have the afternoon off his lessons to attend her party. This was a small bright spot in a sea of confusing catastrophe.

Kizi was invited too, for one thing, which meant that there was next to no chance of Sanuar and Ens sneaking off alone for truly serious conversation even if they did manage to talk.

For another, Ens's principal gift on the occasion of her coming of age was a modest fraction of the Riawae landholdings. She wouldn't know exactly which ones until the party was in full swing, but her mother had warned her at breakfast that she was getting some - "ones under adequate management, you won't have to lift a finger, these are more or less for practice". So she wouldn't be surprised perhaps to the point of an impolite reaction at her party. Ens's sister had gotten mostly farms, but she actively liked farms, while Ens had no discernible land ownership preference because the entire thing sounded terrifying.

For a third, her entire self was screaming *it's LADY Riawae, damn it!* as loudly as possible and she was about to be called Lord more times in the next few hours than she usually suffered in a week.

Kizi arrived first. She'd brought a present - midsize box draped in patterned cloth, she'd been fishing for ideas and had seemed to settle on resupplying Ens's makeup kit but the technicalities of surprise had to be observed. She chatted happily to Ens's mother and put it on the side table that wasn't designated for refreshments and then drifted over to Ens.

"Happy birthday, Ens!"

"Thank you."

"Are they testing you for mage potential?" Kizi wondered. "It's your seventeenth."

"I don't have a mage ancestor for three generations back on either side," Ens said, shaking her head. "No point."

"My birthday is in a month and I'm getting checked again just to be sure."

"The Fourteenth Archmage's son Sanuar Vayar is coming to the party," mentioned Ens. "He came up with late-onset mana himself."

"Oh, lovely. Perhaps he can tell me whether to hope I have it or hope I don't."

"I'm - not sure what to expect him to say on that." They hadn't seen much of each other since Sanuar had started lessons. Ens didn't know much about how he felt about the subject. Telegrams were too - filtered; Sanuar did not generally type out the slump in his shoulders or the droop in his eyes.

"So I'll ask him, then, if there's a chance."

"Mmhm."

"You're probably getting some of your family properties, aren't you? I'm afraid of getting mine, apparently managing them is legitimately difficult and I don't feel prepared at all. They don't teach it in school!"

Ens nodded.

More guests arrived; Kizi had been early and everyone else was politely punctual. Even Sanuar. Sanuar arrived between Ens's sister's fiancé and one of Ens's father's colleagues, bearing a cloth-covered box and a tentative smile. He put it on the table. He looked around and then made a beeline for Ens.

"Happy birthday."

"Thanks. Sanuar, this is Lady Kizi Indabar. Kizi, Sanuar Vayar," said Ens, feeling inane. Sanuar must have guessed. Kizi could have too.

"A pleasure," said Kizi, shaking Sanuar's hand. "I'm coming up on my own seventeenth and my grandmother is a mage, any advice?"

"Uh," said Sanuar. "Not especially. Maybe - pick a specialty in advance, in case?"

"Oh, I have, I'd want to be an object mage."

"Okay. That shouldn't require much, uh, setup, you could just imprint your mana on like one of your shoes, or something."

"I might bring some personal object just for sentiment, but yes."

"...Do you have a teacher lined up?"

"My grandmother said she'd do it."

"Okay, that's good. I mean, if you like your grandmother," said Sanuar.

"I do," Kizi assured him. "Oh, but we're ignoring the birthday boy."

Ens tried not to flinch. She didn't know if she managed. "It's quite all right, I mean, I'm glad you're getting along," she said. *I wanted him to hate her. I want a reason to hate her.*

The food was delicious, Ens's suit itched, Kizi stayed at her elbow and made charming conversation with everyone who came by with birthday wishes. Sanuar didn't loiter. Ens couldn't chase him, couldn't kiss him, couldn't even give him some more socially acceptable reason to stay with her because if she did that eventually she *would* kiss him. He milled through the crowd just barely taller than the next

tallest guest, visible wherever he went, and she tracked him with her eyes when she couldn't stop herself.

Sanuar had to leave when everyone else did; only Kizi had an excuse to linger. He said goodbye, first.

"I'll see you next time we're both free," Ens said.

"Telegram me," said Sanuar. "The housekeeper can take messages if I'm not home."

"Of course," said Ens. "Thank you so much for coming."

"Thank you for inviting me. Happy birthday," murmured Sanuar, and then he had to go meet his carriage.

"You're close friends?" asked Kizi.

Ens nodded mutely.

"Which present was his?" Kizi wondered.

"Theater tickets for when school's on break again." In sets of three. Very optimistic of Sanuar. There was a letter hidden under the tickets that Ens hadn't had a chance to read yet.

"Ens?" asked Kizi softly.

"Mm?"

"You act like you like him, and before I wasn't sure, but now I'm pretty confident you *don't* like me, even as friends. I'm not expecting flowers and stargazing but if you don't even like me, why haven't you asked your mother to call it off with mine?"

"I." Ens swallowed. "I can't tell her things. It sounds like you can - talk to yours. I can't."

"Why not?"

Ens shook her head.

"I can go to my mother if you want but I need to tell her *something* . I can make something up but I don't want to accidentally get it *right* and ruin some secret you're keeping," Kizi said.

"I just."

Ens's parents were off elsewhere; her sister was at her fiancé's house. The servants were all in the adjoining building washing the party dishes. The Riawae home was deserted except for the two of them.

"I just..."

"Ens, please, I'm not going to - I hope I've at least proved myself fairly harmless even if I haven't managed likable?"

"I," began Ens again, and then she snatched Kizi's present off the table and headed for the stairs. "I want to show - let me show you something."

"Okay..." Kizi followed her. Ens went all the way up, up to her room, with the preexisting makeup kit, with the dress in the back of the closet, with her sister's room full of jewelry just down the hall if she couldn't sell the effect without it.

"Just - just sit on the bed and for goodness sake don't say or do anything or I'll lose my nerve," said Ens. Kizi obeyed. Ens grabbed the package out of her closet, went into her bathroom and sat at her mirror, and opened the present and the old kit and went to work.

Line the eyes, contour the face, special attention on the jawline, stain the lips, color on the cheeks, shadow and highlight -

Step into the dress -

(it felt so *good* why did it have to feel like that if Ens had never known *rightness* then she wouldn't be so tortured when things were *wrong wrong wrong*)

Ens listened, but there was no sound of anyone entering the house. It was just her and Kizi.

Kizi, look, you can't marry me, I'm a girl too.

Kizi, look, you can't marry me, I'm clearly delusional.

Kizi, look, I'm pretty, I want to show someone else but you're all I've got right now.

Ens opened the door.

And Kizi's jaw dropped.

Niomah

Stairs down.

Stairs up.

Hesh Linnar.

"Hi, Niomah. Let me carry your water for you."

"How kind." He already knew where she lived. The Timrar fountain worked, if one day he took the water hostage.

"It's no problem." He fell into step beside her. "Look, I really like you."

"Oh, nonsense, nothing to like -"

"No, really," he protested. "I like you. You're funny and you're pretty and, and I've been talking to your grandfather..."

ugh

"...and he said it'd be okay if I courted you, you know, properly. I have my own place. It's not that far from where your family lives, even."

"Give the water."

"I can carry it, it's no trouble."

"Give, need drink."

With that Hesh released the jug and Niomah swigged a mouthful to get the taste of that idea off her tongue. "Prefer," she said, after that, holding tightly to the handle, "that you did not."

"What? Why? I've got a steady job and everything, and -"

"Please, no."

"- and look, I'm a damn sight better than the usual sort of guy you'd pick up living here, your grandfather said so himself."

"Terribly kind *but no* ."

"Why not? You've got to give me a reason."

"Do not care for company."

"Then why've you been letting me carry your water every day, huh? Got you."

She was being *polite* . What a stupid mistake, assuming that politeness would be correctly identified as such instead of having its head swapped with a different animal and labeled as yet a third

creature that had never existed. "Then stop carrying water. My arms work."

"But I want to help you."

"Help by not asking grandfather any more things."

"I can go to your dad if that's more traditional? Look, I know your family's not isolationist, your grandfather brought your niece to work the other day and she's half and half."

"Is different."

"Yeah, how?"

"Is." Her Gath was failing her. She was not sure she could have gotten through to Hesh Linnar even if he'd spoken fluent Arnysh. "Please go."

"I'm not some random Mainlander who doesn't know anything, come on, you're not going to convince me that it matters that your niece's dad is the Arnysh one instead of the other way around. My step-grandmother's the mage down the street -"

Oh, the mage down the street. The life mage. The one they were going to pay to fix her brother's eye.

Oh *great* .

No wonder Grandfather liked him. If they fixed the eye they could then fix Grandfather's leg, he could go back to his old job which paid better -

"Yeah, now you like the idea, huh? She does family discounts when she can and everything."

My lost boy is a mage. Her lost boy was barely trained in his water specialty and hadn't even chosen secondaries. Last she heard. She

could not explain having the son of the fourteenth archmage on call. And she didn't, even. She just worked in his house and when he was home they argued.

"And I have my own place," he repeated, "and a job -"

My priceless artwork is heir to a fortune - Her priceless artwork would be disinherited probably if anyone found out that he had ever kissed Niomah.

"And your family likes me."

To which she had no reply even in her thoughts.

"Let me carry your water."

Mutely, Niomah handed over the jug.

Sanuar

Swat . Sanuar's hand stung like he'd touched a hot stove. "Agh -"

"Oh, shut up," snarled Absam. "You know what you *should* be crying about? The deplorable state of your mana. How long were you sitting there? What were you doing, daydreaming?"

"No, sir, I meditated -"

Swat .

Sanuar bit his lip.

"Don't lie to me. Sit back down and *actually* focus on your water. Put your mana in *order* . Don't embarrass me, you lazy, *pathetic* excuse for a mage, just *do your work* ."

"Yessir."

Absam swatted him one more time for good measure and then turned around; Sanuar collapsed on his cushion. He wanted to pull a little water out of his bowl to cool the mark on his hand but that would probably just make it worse. Meditating. Meditating. Suspended with effortless focus -

Swat .

" *Augh !*"

"Quit your whining. You've been there for hours and what have you got to show for it? If anything your mana looks *worse !*" roared Absam. "That'll land you a slot next to mine and your father's for certain, won't it, what an innovation, meditating *backwards !* Get out of my sight."

Sanuar didn't have to be told twice. He scurried past his meditating co-prentice and bolted from the tower.

He squinted at the sun. His ride home wouldn't be along for another two hours or so. He could walk, but not fast enough to catch Niomah; he could go to Ens's, but she'd be at school until the point at which he'd have to meet his carriage. He couldn't make beads when all his paper and ink were up in Absam's office - he could buy more but it was pretty windy outdoors and he didn't have a set of combs of his own - he had nothing to do.

He went to Ninden's house. Ninden, who had "helped" him awaken his mana in the first place because he couldn't admit it was Niomah. Ninden was sort of all right company, could be explained if his parents found out he'd been visiting him.

Ninden was home, and answered the door when Sanuar rang. "Oh, hi," he yawned. "How're you?"

"Kind of terrible."

"D'you want to come in?"

"Sure, why not."

Sanuar flopped onto Ninden's couch. "So what's terrible?" Ninden asked.

"My magic teacher."

"Who've you got?"

"Archmage Absam."

"Haven't heard of anyone *liking* him."

"Yes, well."

"You still just water? Are you going to pick up pure mana, like he does?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"My primary's pure mana too," said Ninden. "I thought it'd be the best thing, but it's all theory stuff. I don't even use it when I'm making mana spots, you can do those with anything."

"You can?"

"Sure. I mean, you'd probably have to adapt them for different specialities."

"Oh." What had given Ninden the idea that Sanuar wanted to hear about mana spots in the first place Sanuar didn't know, but at least Ninden was low-effort to interact with in that way. "...Is it, like, easier or faster or something to meditate on your own mana...?"

"No? I mean, I usually don't. It's easier to focus on breathing than to get a fix on my mana now that I have the air secondary. There's

nothing better about pure mana meditation. If I had it to do over again I'd go empath primary."

"Oh." There went that hypothesis.

"Hey, do you want to learn to make spots? It's dead easy. Just promise you won't sell them north of here and I'll teach you."

Sanuar did not know exactly how much mana spots sold for but he didn't think they were likely to be a better revenue source than spell beads. All they did was supposedly provide the floating feeling of meditation without requiring focus to drop into the trance or being a mage to begin with; they weren't even particularly black-market to drive up the price.

But it would be sort of nice to learn something, *anything*, when no one was going to smack him with a comb. "Okay."

So Ninden walked him through it. It was as promised very easy, just painting blobs and imbuing them with mana the same way one did to the stripes on a spell bead. And then Ninden pasted half of the demonstration batch to his own arm and keeled over in an armchair, and Sanuar let himself out.

He met the carriage, no one asked where he'd been for the last hour, he touched the perfectly folded corner of his bedspread.

He grabbed the telegrammer. *This is Sanuar, please give the telegrammer to Ens.*

Just a second, someone tapped back, and then, This is Ens and I'm really freaking out are you alone

Yes, Sanuar replied at once, and, *What's wrong, are you okay?*

I mean kind of mostly basically but

What is it?

So I uh pause. I did something dumb. I told Kizi about the girl thing.

You don't mean Niomah, right, you mean

I mean I put on my dress and a faceful of makeup and showed her

Did it put her off did she tell your parents??? asked Sanuar.

She liked it came the reply.

Sanuar stared at that, and then another one spooled out. *She liked it,* Ens repeated.

She liked that you were a girl?

That's what she said that's what it looked like I don't know what to do

I mean does this actually solve any part of the problem? Sanuar asked.

No? Not exactly? She was like pause. I don't know she didn't look like she wanted to pounce on me pause she said she wanted to clarify that this did not make me more attractive just more relatable pause what does relatable mean

I guess she likes hanging out with girls more or something, typed Sanuar, reeling.

This was not part of the plan sent Ens.

I know I know I'm trying to think of something useful to say

She was supposed to decide that this meant we could not possibly get married and then go tell her mom

I know, Sanuar answered.

I can't tell her about you or Niomah

I mean she's met me and could maybe guess even if you were vague, tapped Sanuar. So maybe not me, but tell her about Niomah without saying her name...?

But what if

Sanuar waited, but there was no new tape spooling out. *What if what?*

I don't want to marry her. I don't want to marry somebody who's just my friend.

And your mom won't budge?

No. Kizi's will but only if Kizi has something to tell her pause but if the straws in the chocolate milk business doesn't do it pause then I'm out of stuff, out of excuses

So you don't want to spend your last excuse in case it doesn't work?

Yes which is stupid, replied Ens, because it not working would look like her wanting to marry me even though I have a girlfriend and a boyfriend .

But that wouldn't be what you wanted.

Maybe, answered Ens, it's the best I can hope for.

Sanuar swallowed. *I had an argument with Niomah the other day.*

What no why what about?

I can make a lot of money with beads. I don't even have to be very good at it, Sanuar tapped. I want to save up and buy us all a house

and we can forget about all our parents.

What yes please let's do that right now I mean as soon as possible. Pause. I mean I already own some buildings, they're not very nice yet but I already have them and maybe we could renovate them pause birthday presents pause tell Niomah let's do it there's an empty apartment in my block on Ninth and Prism.

Niomah doesn't want to.

Why?

She thinks we'd dump her and leave her jobless and disowned. This was not a nice way to put it but that was what it boiled down to, wasn't it? She thought that Sanuar was making promises he wouldn't bother keeping.

But we pause. I can't even give her the building. They're tied up in a sort of trust thing, I can't freely sell them yet.

You could move into them without your parents' permission though?

I can do most things with them as long as they don't change hands but nothing that'd be really reassuring

I could give her a house if I bought it but it'll take a while to have enough. I didn't even think of that. Pause. But she still thinks we'd dump her and a house won't be enough to live on by itself.

Crap, replied Ens.

Sanuar almost typed that they could just move in together without her.

Sure, and then they'd never see her again. He couldn't do it.

I don't know what to do, Sanuar tapped instead.

Me either, Ens replied.

Niomah

Maybe Hesh was lying.

Maybe he was not, in fact, the step-grandson of the mage down the street. Or perhaps he did not get along with his step-grandmother particularly well. Niomah would not expect to draw from a copious well of favors if her grandfather remarried, after all.

Maybe Hesh was full of hot air and she could clock him across the face with the jug of water he wanted to carry so badly.

So Niomah went the long way around so he would not encounter her on her way home from work, and went to the mage's house. *Life Mage*, it said in Arnysh on the door, and under that *Substance, Emotion, Energy and Coadah Tira*.

There were people in the waiting room. Someone with a swollen foot, someone with a howling toddler. Niomah took a seat and tried not to look like she thought her business was urgent.

Eventually the child was seen, and then the fellow with the foot, and by then it was well past dinnertime and Niomah was going to be in trouble but she waited. Someone came in with a cough - deep pockets, had to be, to come in for just a cough; he ought to save enough to move out of the ghetto entirely instead of being such a hypochondriac - but maybe it was worse than it looked, so Niomah waited for him too.

Finally she was the only person in the room and wrinkled old mage whose arms looked like driftwood and whose eyes looked like black peas stuck her head out of her workroom and said, "Mm?"

"I - hello, I'm not sick, it's only," Niomah swallowed, "are, are you Hesh Linnar's grandmother?"

"After a fashion," said Coadah Tira. "If we assume my lover's family's contagious. What ails you, child?"

Oh so many things.

"I, I'm not sick," Niomah said, *and can't afford to pay you just to fix the blisters on my feet*, "but uh -" Oh, the mage was Arnysh, she could just talk Arnysh, probably, right? Arnysh it was. "He very insistently wants to court me and he's talked to my grandfather and he said you were his step-grandmother and I just wanted to, to see if that was true."

"And why is that so interesting?" asked Coadah in the same language.

Gulp. "He said you do a family discount."

"You're not sick, child, you said yourself. Does something run in your family?"

"No ma'am," said Niomah. "It's only, my brother."

"You want a family discount for your brother because you're considering courting my lover's grandson?"

She sounded incredulous. Oh, hell. Oh, thank goodness. "It's his eye."

"My fees are posted on the door, child."

"Yes ma'am. I know. I'm sorry for bothering you."

"It's no trouble. You waited very patiently. But courting Hesh isn't a good way to get much of anything from me. Isn't a good way to do anything, far as I know."

Niomah nodded. "I don't, I don't really want to, it's only."

"Your brother's eye."

"Yes."

"I'd like to give more discounts than I do. No one's convinced me to move out of the ghetto where I'm so needed yet, and the rent is a pittance. But you saw how long the wait was when it's yea expensive."

"Yes ma'am."

"I'll tell you something, child." Coadah wagged her finger. "I listened to my daddy for thirty long years, and I got married, and it didn't turn out he was right all along, it didn't turn out I'd grow into it, it didn't turn out to be anything but what it always looked like."

Niomah swallowed. "Then what?"

"Then my husband died and I met a lady whose worst fault is that her baby brought Hesh into the world, and while that is a rather grave misdeed - judging by the look on your face when you mention him, poor girl - it's one I can live with, instead of one my father could."

A lady.

Niomah nodded rapidly, eyes wide. "I'll, I'll think about that, ma'am."

"Good girl. Run along now. Tell him he needs to cultivate better ways to attract girls than being arguably related to me."

"I'll. I might, ma'am." Hesh was not one of the leering groping armed-to-the-teeth soldiers who'd been prowling over the summer but he might not be totally safe to talk back to like that.

"What was your name, child?"

"Niomah Mihi," said Niomah, smiling slightly, and she let herself out.

Ens

"So what are you right now?" Kizi asked.

"I'm kind of tired of answering that?" said Ens.

"Sorry. It's just really *interesting* ."

"It's really not."

"Sorry."

"It's - it's fine. I'm the one who told you." He hesitated. "What does *relatable* mean?"

"Oh - I don't really know myself. It's just the word that came to mind? Occasionally I've wished that I could marry a girl, if you really want to know."

"Because girls are relatable?"

"...Okay, I don't know how else to explain so it's theater analogy time!" said Kizi. "You know how in *Sleep Soundly* the main character's sister spends half her first song talking about how little she wants to, um...?"

"...half of the song is about how she wants to live on the beach, so I assume you're talking about the part where she really doesn't want to sleep with men?" Ens said.

"Yes! That. And I heard that song and I was like 'how interesting, neither do I', and then in the second act it turned out that she *did* want to sleep with, what was her name? That one girl."

"Um, I'm still *shaped* -"

"No, no, let me finish. And then I was like 'well, that is less interesting, because I don't want to do that either'."

"...Uh-huh."

"I just don't," shrugged Kizi. "But I *do* want to get married! I want to get married and have a designated somebody to be around all of the time and I think I will maybe like kissing if I try it and I don't think I will *mind awfully* if whoever I marry wants to have sex some of the time and I think I'd like to be a mom! And in the very loveliest of worlds I could marry a girl, because that's just... more appealing, I guess? But it's not the worst thing ever if I only get most of what I want. And you're sometimes a girl!"

I am all the time somebody who wants to be wanted in exactly the way you don't want people, oh help. "Oh."

"...I'd really rather you didn't tell anyone," Kizi said. "I don't think it could possibly help if my mother were fretting about it, and explaining that I'm quite fine with how things *are* would require explaining you, which I don't think you want."

"I won't - I mean," Ens swallowed. "I won't."

"Thank you," said Kizi.

"You're welcome."

"Thank you so much for telling me, too," she said. "For trusting me with it. Oh - do you want to come to my mage test?"

"It's - next week?"

"Yes."

"I - will be there, sure."

It's not the worst thing ever if I only get most of what I want, but what if I barely get any of it?

Sanuar

Ask her, Sanuar telegrammed to Ens, hypothetically if since she doesn't even want to ever have sex if it would be all right for you to
He sent that one off before he ran into the message length limit, but before he could send another, Ens's reply came in:

I did!

What did she say?

She said no. She said people would find out sooner or later and it would be humiliating

Oh

She said it's still cheating, that just because she's whatever she is (pause) (why are so many of the people I meet things) (pause) that doesn't make it okay to cheat on her and and she has a point? But.

Yeah , Sanuar answered helplessly.

She said since she didn't expect to, you know, mind, there was no good reason.

I'm so sorry.

I don't even want to sleep with her! I want an unsupervised afternoon with you and Niomah and a stupidly huge bed.

Sanuar wasn't sure if he was glad that Ens couldn't see the hot blush on his face or wistful that she couldn't.

I love you, Sanuar wrote.

A weekend, elaborated Ens. A year, a forever. Instead I'm in school all day and then after Kizi and her mother are new block bringing me along for kicks while they go around showing Kizi buildings new block for her own coming of age presents. For all I know we'll walk right by Niomah's house. New block. I don't think she owns Niomah's house? New block. Mine are all hands-off as I got them but Kizi needs to do actual work managing hers.

I love you. I have to go to my lesson now. Sanuar ripped up all the accumulated telegrammer tape, hid a quick note for Niomah catching her up on Ens's situation as clearly as he dared, and finally answered his impatient mother's calls that the carriage needed to be on its way now if it was going to be back in time to take her to *her* appointment.

His Learned Excellency The Sixth Archmage Golar Absam was in meditation of his own when Sanuar quietly opened the door. Tasnan was at the bead table, painting. Sanuar tiptoed to peer at his instruction sheet and hand him combs. He wanted to be alert, not half-awake in his bowl of water, when Absam was paying attention to the world again.

When Tasnan painted the last line and the bead was rolled and shellacked and dried and sliced and tested -

"Hey, Tasnan?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you know if there's any way to change teachers?"

"You're not a huge fan either, huh?"

"Uh, no. He doesn't seem as hard on you."

"That doesn't mean I like him. I looked into it, there's basically nothing, no archmage or mage-in-good-standing will take you if you

leave an archmage. I only have another few months, though, you're late-onset -"

"Yeah." Sanuar swallowed and flipped through his own textbook of bead instructions. There was one he hadn't tried yet for filtering large amounts of water that would go for plenty of money - resold to someone managing a reservoir, presumably, or a fish farm or something - but it was longer than he'd pulled off before. He decided he'd rather try that when Absam was actually out of the room instead of while he could emerge at any moment from meditation and start yelling.

Tasnan went on, "And if you don't have your accreditation *or* a teacher you can't sell to a halfway decent bead store because they think you'll give them duds and vanish into the night. Your parents might take you? Since they're your parents?"

"No such luck. I suppose I could just drop out and make mana spots," grumbled Sanuar.

"You know how?"

"It's really easy," Sanuar found himself saying. "And you can do it with any specialty."

"Huh."

"I can show you if you want, real quick."

"Sure, why not, he's in deep. And I have a friend who likes them for chronic pain," Tasnan said.

"I didn't even know they worked for that."

"Sure, especially muscle tension stuff. C'mon, let's see."

So Sanuar took a scratchpaper end of a failed bead out of the wastebasket, which would work just fine for mana spots, and painted a line of four while Tasnan watched.

"Kind of boring," remarked Tasnan.

"Like I said it's really easy," shrugged Sanuar. He put them in his pocket; he could give them to Ninden later if he didn't meet a chronically pained beggar on his lunch break or anything.

"Guess so. You should probably meditate."

"Why *aren't* you meditating?" asked Absam, slowly rising from his meditation cushion. "Vayar, are you moving on from wasting your own time to wasting Aproz's? Was it not efficient enough to ruin half the bead paper you go through, somehow by impossible sleight of mana meditate in reverse so that you barely have the mana to justify the ink, and display such perpetual disrespect -"

"Sorry sir," squeaked Sanuar, as Tasnan flung himself in the direction of his prism to start meditating back the orderliness of mana he'd spent on his bead roll.

"What were you even doing?" asked Absam disgustedly.

"Nothing, sir, wasting time, I'll go meditate now," said Sanuar.

" *Try to do it correctly* ," growled Absam.

"Yes sir."

Sanuar sat. Sanuar looked at his bowl of water.

Why didn't it *work* ?

Sometimes it worked. He had not, he thought, just totally failed to learn to meditate in the first place. He was successfully focusing on the water and orienting his mana at it. And then it just - didn't help.

The water was still and his mana was in constant chaos, barely usable. It had been sort of difficult to dribble it into the *spots*, for crying out loud, and there was no finesse to those at all.

He liked meditating when it worked and it just barely ever did, anymore.

He was definitely not going to get away with this, probably not even once, but -

Sanuar reached into his pocket and pressed his finger to one of the mana spots.

One was a low dose. Ninden used half a dozen at once, sometimes. One was barely noticeable. Maybe half the strength of meditating-when-it-worked, but infinitely superior to meditating-when-it-didn't. Breathe in, breathe out. There was no concentration to maintain; he kept his sense of time.

Sanuar heard Absam's footsteps behind him.

He felt warmth radiating down onto his scalp from Absam's hand.

And Sanuar's mana - rippled like it was being used, like its order was degrading.

The mana spot shouldn't be interacting with his actual mana at all, it was the packaged feeling of meditation, not the effect. He wasn't doing anything to his bowl of water. He wasn't impregnating the already-dry ink of the mana spot with more magic. It should not be doing that.

Why was Absam standing over him?

Why was Sanuar's mana doing *anything* -

- why was it doing exactly the same thing it always did when he meditated, while he wasn't even -

No, not always.

Only when Absam was in the room. Where, pure-mana specialist that he was, he could just steal the stillness out of Sanuar. Where, pure-mana specialist that he was, he could reach into Sanuar and take whatever he wanted while Sanuar was helpless.

Without further thought, Sanuar grabbed the entire sheet of four mana spots in his fist. He surged to his feet, knocking Absam's hand aside, and stared down at the Sixth Archmage's startled, furious face.

Before Absam could shout Sanuar into timidity again Sanuar slapped his teacher on the forehead with the sheet of mana spots.

Absam slumped to the floor, face slack, and Sanuar bolted from the room.

Niomah

Niomah had walked all the way to the Learned Sanuar's Parents' house for work only to be told that they wanted her to hurry and go home early so that she would not be lurking when The Learned Sanuar's Father's sister came for a visit. Apparently it was poor form to have a housekeeper lurking (*lurking*) with a guest over. So Niomah rushed through her cleaning - truth be told, she could get her work done this quickly on any day if she had to; the Learned Sanuar's Parents were just used to the speed she adopted when Sanuar was home from her initial hiring.

And she went home in the midafternoon and perhaps she would bypass the very *definitely* "lurking" Hesh Linnar.

But there was no such luck. There he was with Niomah's second-oldest brother and a couple of other Arnysh boys, loitering in that inimitably teenage boy way on the street corner. One of the boys she didn't know was bouncing a rubber ball loudly against some poor person's wall. Her brother was in the middle of trying to perform a handstand. She wished he'd find a job again.

"Hi, Niomah!" called Hesh. Her brother echoed him a beat behind.

"Afternoon," said Niomah tightly.

"Hesh says you're courting!" Niomah's brother chirped, falling and rolling with some grace to a sitting position on the sidewalk.

"*I*? I am carrying water," said Niomah.

All the boys laughed.

"Let me carry it for you," said Hesh.

"Oh, no, feeling underworked today, home early, I will," said Niomah.

"Come on, I always carry your water."

"What a very long time that is to do a thing. You must be tired."

"Come on. Give it."

"No. Am courting this water. Planning to marry it. You are probably most disappointed."

Hesh laughed, but there was an edge to it, and he grabbed for her arm.

Niomah dodged, but her back collided with another boy who'd circled around. Her brother was still sitting on the sidewalk.

"Just let me carry your water," said Hesh. "Don't make a big deal about it."

"My hand is glued to jug. No cure, permanently forever. So *sad*," said Niomah through her teeth. "What affliction, you should not want to marry into it."

"I always," he said, reaching for her arm again and connecting this time, "carry your water."

Niomah looked at her brother.

"Why are you making a big deal of it?" wondered Niomah's brother in Arnysh. "I'll tell Father that's all you let him do, if he wonders about your honor."

"There are so few things I care about less than my -" Niomah lurched away from Hesh; her arm chafed but she broke his hold. "- honor right now -"

"Heh," said Hesh. "I speak enough Arnysh to have the gist of that. What-all do you think your brother could cover for, huh?"

"Oh no. No gist," Niomah said rapidly in Gath. "Nothing to understand private family joke no no -"

"He could tell your dad we just went for a walk," said Hesh, stalking towards her. "And then we could... just go for a walk."

"Brother should be chaperoning all times very angry father -"

"Let's not have a chaperone," said Hesh, "and say we did -"

" *Do you have ears* -"

Hesh reached. Niomah dropped to the ground to evade; the jug went skidding out of her hand but didn't break. She rolled and looked involuntarily at it - at the moment she had immensely greater

concerns than its fate but in her head Hesh was still marked *will not leave my water jug alone* -

A pale Mainlander hand closed around the handle of her water jug.

And picked it up.

He was so tall.

Niomah scrambled in Sanuar's direction. " *Help* ," she hissed desperately.

Sanuar nodded, stone-faced.

He uncapped the jug.

"Is my *real boyfriend* ," Niomah snarled at Hesh and her brother and the extra boys. "Is my *water mage boyfriend* . Touch me and *drown* . Do you have *ears* ?"

"You have another boyfriend?" Hesh exclaimed, outraged.

Yes but that's not important right now you idiot. "Have *this* boyfriend, have never wanted *you* in my entire life, will not be any amount of sad if he has to drown you," Niomah said. "Try something. *Water mage* ."

Sanuar hefted the jug casually in his left hand. He put his right in his pocket.

Hesh and Niomah's brother and the extra boys looked him up and down. He was a head taller than the tallest of them, he looked completely unthreatened.

"You're her boyfriend?" asked Hesh uncertainly.

"Yes. The question is will I actually drown you if you hurt her," said Sanuar, slowly, levelly. "That's also a yes."

Boys looked at the jug of water.

Sanuar pulled his hand out of his pocket and wiggled his fingers at the jug. A thin stream of water spiraled out of the mouth, hovering obediently in midair.

One of the extra boys ran first, and then the other one and Hesh and Niomah's brother too fled a step behind.

Sanuar pooled the water back in the jug neatly, and set it down, and then Niomah tackle-hugged him, only avoiding knocking him over by the sheer fact that he was twice her size. " *Sanuar* how are you being here did you learn telepathy and find my being upset and then be here so fast by enchanted horse why are you *here* ?"

"Oh," said Sanuar, hugging her and lifting her just a little off the ground and then letting her feet touch down again. "Um, I may have drugged my teacher and run away from the mages' tower without telling anyone and then meditated at a pond for three hours and then decided to come see if I could find your house, and warn you that I probably have to leave home and sell mana spots for a living."

Niomah blinked.

"He was... stealing my mana," Sanuar mumbled. "But I can't... prove that."

"Stealing it? Does he not grow his own?" asked Niomah indignantly.

"I didn't ask him why," Sanuar said in the smallest possible voice. He picked up the jug, looked up and down the street like he expected Hesh and company to return. "I just, I, I needed him to not be doing that. And I had mana spots in my pocket."

"Oh my lost boy," breathed Niomah. "Oh look at you, you're shaking."

"I," Sanuar said, and then he stopped, lips pursed, hand tight around the jug of water.

Niomah hugged him tight.

"Brother knows about you now," she said. "Of times to run off now is fine."

"We should stop by Ens's," said Sanuar. "She's got buildings, we could all go - live in one of her buildings and figure out what's next. If she'll come. Or loan us an apartment if she won't come."

Niomah nodded. "You know the way?"

"Yeah. Do you want to, I don't know, grab anything from home while you're here?"

"Like what?" said Niomah, shaking her head. "No, nothing. Run away with me, lost boy. Rescued girl in danger, customary thing."

"*Maybe* my co-apprentice will back me up and *maybe* it will matter," Sanuar said softly. "I just can't count on it."

"So maybe you live in home and I live in priceless artwork's pricey building and am visited there. *I* do not want to be at home now. Family is not so good at the protecting."

"They wouldn't have -?"

"One of those boys was my brother," she muttered with a fluttery gesture. "Oh so helpful."

"One of them was - oh, hell. Okay," Sanuar said, and with the hand that wasn't holding the jug he caught Niomah's hand and squeezed it. "Okay, I'm in for it, you're in for it, we'll check on Ens."

They walked. Niomah led the way to the relevant exit from the ghetto and Sanuar took over from there.

They were a couple of blocks from the fuzzy edges of the Arnysh neighborhood when Niomah squinted at some pedestrians coming the other way. "Is that -"

Sanuar squinted too. "...Is that Ens? And Kizi. Yeah."

"Oh, *Kizi* . Poor priceless artwork."

"Poor Kizi too, after a fashion, but yeah."

"Should... we...?"

"I think Kizi's already keeping some secrets," said Sanuar. "Also if you let go of my hand now I might die, but follow Ens's lead about - Ens-related things?"

Niomah squeezed his hand. "Yes."

In the distance, Ens's chin lifted, and he turned to his accompaniment to say something, and broke into a run and skidded to a stop in front of Sanuar and Niomah. "What are - what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to respectively be at -?"

"- work ended early," Niomah said.

"I assaulted the Sixth Archmage and bolted and am still standing up through sheer force of Niomah," Sanuar said.

Ens looked incredulously at Sanuar. "What?"

"...There was context. But Kizi's almost within earshot now."

"...okay. Um I haven't decided to tell her about... anything."

"Secrets are safe," Niomah assured Ens.

Ens nodded, then looked over his shoulder at Kizi. "I was right, it's Sanuar," he said.

"Hi again, Sanuar!" said Kizi. "And who's this?"

"My girlfriend Niomah," said Sanuar.

"Hi, Niomah, it's nice to meet you," said Kizi.

"Hello," said Niomah with a toothy smile.

"What, uh, brings you here?" Sanuar asked.

"My mother and I were going to go tour some of the things I got for my birthday and some of those things are near here. And I thought we could bring Ens along, because why not. Mother stopped to rest a few blocks back and we thought we'd go on alone," Kizi explained. "What about you? Just visiting Niomah, I guess? Wow, do your parents, um, know?"

Sanuar shook his head.

"I mean as far as I'm concerned that's your business," Kizi assured him. "I was just wondering."

Silence.

"So," Sanuar said. "You've had your birthday, then?"

"Oh, yes! I'm a mage," nodded Kizi. "They're not kidding when they tell you that it's disappointing to go to normal-ordered mana after the perfect start, are they? But I'll get used to it."

"And your grandmother's teaching you."

"Yes. Although mostly she's having me learn from books and meditate for hours. She's very old and tired and stopped taking students she wasn't related to ages ago."

"...Um, Sanuar," said Ens. "There was a telegram from your parents at my house. I didn't read it all because Kizi's mother was waiting

but I have the tape."

Sanuar held out his hand.

Ens gave him some telegrammer printout, which Sanuar had a bit of trouble reading with only one hand (he could put the jug down; he did not have this kind of liberty with Niomah's hand) but he managed.

In a dozen blocks of message: *Honored Riawaes, this is Learned Lady Vayar. We have received disturbing news about our son's conduct. We know he is friends with your son, and if you happen to encounter him we would like him to know that His Learned Excellency Absam is furious and that everyone we could think of to propose Sanuar as a student to has blacklisted him. For that matter, his behavior, from the sound of it, was sufficiently shameful that hometeaching him is no longer an option compatible with our ongoing careers; it will be generally understood that if we could not raise him to age seventeen without leaving him well-behaved we will be similarly unable to teach him magic without grievous mishandling. He has left our hands completely tied and may return home solely on the condition that he find some way to salvage the situation with a replacement teacher so that we may assure our fellow mages that he is not being left to go rogue nor under the apparently inadequate tutelage of his own relatives, although we have no idea what we could possibly have done wrong that would have precipitated the events. We have no idea where he might find one who will even consider the idea but it is just barely possible. Thank you in the event that you relay this message, honored Riawaes.*

"Your parents didn't *read* this, did they?" asked Sanuar, horrified.

"No," said Ens. " *I read the first three blocks and then tore it off to take with me.*"

"Thanks," said Sanuar. "Well. I guess that answers that."

"So much fancy language," Niomah objected.

"I can't go home unless I can find a mage teacher," said Sanuar.
"Sounds like Kizi's grandmother isn't an option, either."

"Oh dear," said Kizi. "I'm sorry, she really isn't."

"...I know a mage," said Niomah. "Arnysh, in ghetto, not too far from my family's home."

"Is he, um," said Sanuar.

"She," said Niomah. "She is I think very nice."

"Is she taking students?"

"Maybe. May want to pick up extra kinds of magic to help with her business. She does not like to have such long lines."

"I can do that," said Sanuar.

"Oh, the question for Ens, anyway," said Niomah, snapping her fingers.

"Oh right," Sanuar said. "Ens, you own some, some buildings, right, Niomah is on the outs with her family right now -"

"Oh - um -" said Ens. "Yeah, I can finagle something. It wouldn't be near here though. Near your new teacher or any of her family Niomah still wants to see."

"I own some buildings hereabouts," said Kizi. "You just want an apartment?"

"Maybe move in some of sisters," sighed Niomah. "If they will come. But yes one apartment would be so lovely, but cannot ask -"

"Look, I - Sanuar, can you vouch for her - Niomah, how old are you -?"

"Yes," said Sanuar.

"...seventeen," said Niomah, "almost eighteen, what? This matters for apartment? I have job, could pay rent on very small -"

"I can't *just* hand out apartments, my parents would think I was crazy," said Kizi. "But I can - how much do you like your job?"

"I. It is a job," said Niomah.

"So, not that much?"

"Cannot hardly pay rent if I quit -"

Ens's expression, though, was one of slowly dawning comprehension.

"No, I mean," Kizi said, "apparently my parents've had trouble with apartment buildings managed by non-Arnysh people in the Arnysh ghetto? They wind up clashing with the tenants, it's kind of awful? There is a building that needs a new property manager *yesterday* and I know so little about hiring that going with the 'Sanuar likes you' evaluation process is probably better than nothing."

Niomah blinked. " *Me* ?"

"It comes with an apartment," wheedled Kizi. "I mean, I understand if you'd rather just live in one of Ens's, if he's offering, but I don't know where else to even start looking, I can't just wander up and down the streets yelling *I need a property manager* , can I?"

"...What is job of a property manager?" asked Niomah.

"You'd have to collect the rent - I'll give you some leeway if people need to be late, they have every reason to be upset with how this

has been handled in the past - and take a note of any repairs that need to be made and I'll give you a budget to get them fixed, and if a spot opens up you'd need to evaluate new tenants, and keep track of the keys. The building I have in mind doesn't have any landscaping so it *should* be... doable? What am I saying, I wouldn't even know where to start -"

"Which building?" asked Niomah.

"Fifty-one Timrar?"

" I know where to start," said Niomah, grinning fiercely. "I know. There is a broken window, first of all -"

"You know the place! Oh that's perfect, okay, excellent, can I hire you *right now* , I was kind of dreading walking by there without a solution in my pocket?"

"...Sanuar?" asked Niomah.

"What?" he blinked.

"If you are going home, because you get along with the mage -"

"Oh! Oh - but if I get along with the mage," he laughed, "then I'll just, be in this neighborhood all day, anyway, it'll just be the other way around. Right?"

"Right," said Niomah, smiling again. "Excellent, lovely, yes, hire me right now, Sanuar, tell your learned parents I have replaced job. ...Tell them this when I have been set up in building for at least ten minutes."

"That's really good," said Ens in a soft voice. "That way you're, you're there in your own right, yeah?"

Niomah and Sanuar simultaneously turned their heads to look at Ens. "Oh, pr- oh," said Niomah. "Oh was *so generous* of you offering but - appreciating *very much* , but -"

"Ens," said Sanuar, and he trailed off.

Kizi looked between the three of them.

"What is going on?" she asked.

No one answered her.

"Ens, you've obviously met Niomah before..."

"We've met. She's Sanuar's girlfriend," said Ens. So quiet.

Kizi continued peering at Ens, at Niomah, at Sanuar. At Niomah and Sanuar and Ens.

"Kizi," began Ens, almost voiceless.

"Okay," said Kizi. "First of all, Niomah's brand new job is *not* on the line here, I will still be completely helpless to find Arnysh property managers no matter what you say. Second of all, *I know something is up* and you aren't going to convince me that I'm imagining it. *What is it ?*"

Long, long delay. Ens looked at her shoes. Sanuar looked at Ens. Niomah looked at Kizi.

"Ens," said Sanuar again.

"Priceless artwork," dared Niomah.

Ens looked up, at that.

And glanced in Kizi's direction.

"I hope you're telling the truth about Niomah's job," Ens said, "because I really would rather not marry you."

"All *right*," said Kizi. "I have been telling you all along that I can go to my mother about it! I can tell her - I don't know, I'll tell her I want to find a mage husband and have magic babies."

"Uh, don't lean too hard on the, the magic babies thing," said Sanuar.

"I won't lean on the *babies*. I will lean on the concept of them for my mother's benefit," Kizi clarified.

"...I could maybe set you up with someone," Sanuar added. "Old co-prentice. Perception primary. Mage family, not landholders, but decently prominent."

"Lovely, that will probably placate Mother enormously even if I don't work out with whoever your friend is in the end," said Kizi. "...Am I completely on the wrong page or are *all three of you* dating? That puts some things Ens has said in so much context."

"All three," murmured Sanuar.

"Three straws in a chocolate milk," said Niomah, tossing her hair.

Ens was smiling just slightly, now.

"Well," said Kizi. "I'll just have a conversation with Mother this evening, then. I think I'll sandwich it with the good news about the property management and the mage boy, what's his name?"

"Tasnan Arol," said Sanuar.

"My grandmother's best friend is an Arol, that works nicely," said Kizi. "All right. This has been one heck of a day."

"Say that again," said Niomah emphatically. Sanuar just squeezed her hand.

"Why don't we all go together," Kizi said, "and show you your new home?"

"Best part of entire day," said Niomah.

And they turned and went back into the ghetto, Ens taking Niomah's other hand, Sanuar carrying the water for just-in-case, and Kizi briskly trotting alongside.

Lilac

This story is a sequel to [Threshold](#). This story is also available in audio, which you may find on [this episode of Wingardcast](#).

Our mother died, didn't she.

Lyle put his pocket computer down without answering the message.

It beeped again.

She wouldn't silicize if she was a Saint of the Soul and you're two years older than me and that wasn't a parameter you tweaked so the sim must have pulled it from reality and she's dead.

Lyle's soup had gotten cold. He had sixteen emails flagged as paperwork he needed to handle for Mercy.

Bleep.

God's everlasting sorrow Lyle just tell me!

He picked it up. He tapped the screen.

Yeah.

He looked dubiously at the soup. He'd probably regret it later if he didn't eat any. He picked up the spoon.

Bleep.

Dad?

Lyle put the spoon down. *Alive, not in the hospital or anything.*

Any chance he found Sainthood less compelling after his reason for conversion was gone?

Lyle snorted. *No.*

Fuck.

He snorted harder. *I thought Conceptuals were very uptight about swearing.*

That's a common misconception. We avoid swearing by everlasting torment even though for some reason that's usually considered comparatively mi LYLE LONG DO NOT TRY TO DISTRACT ME I KNOW YOU AREN'T DOING A PROJECT.

Lyle laughed. Just a little. As though she were in the next room and could hear him if he were any louder. *Sorry.*

Does he know about me yet?

No.

Please tell him. I'll sound like some sort of bizarre novelty scam if I contact him myself.

We don't really talk, Lyle wrote.

Surely this is important enough? He has an unexpected extra child.

You're very important Lyle began, and then he erased it. *He has the daughter he always wanted* was also erased. *He's not like you remember,* he eventually sent.

I understand, but he's still the closest I'm going to get.

We really don't talk.

If you keep stonewalling me I will have to go with the bizarre novelty scam option.

Lyle set the computer aside. He ate the soup. He ignored bleeps. He washed the bowl and put it away. He couldn't breathe right.

Lyle, what's wrong?

Was he terrible about you being trans or is it something else?

I'm new to being a sister and I don't know what you need, but he's almost sixty and that isn't exactly optimal talking-people-into-silicization age and something could happen at any time, and what

I

need is to be introduced so I don't have to lose

both

parents when this time yesterday I thought I'd have them forever, Lyle.

Are you one of those people who hates text channels? Come into the lab and I'll go on a screen. I can show you my environment.

Lyle.

He picked it up. He tapped. *I'll be there in half an hour.*

She looked very real. There was an extreme closeup of her hands, complete with fingerprints, as she adjusted the simulated camera-drone in the "air". She had on the sort of outfit that you only ever saw silico avatars and fashion models wearing - very put together in blue and yellow, long coat. The environment looked like a prairie with a sprawling farmhouse sort of architecture rising out of it. Mercy was sitting on a picnic blanket, crushing a square of yellow

wheat gone to seed. The sun was setting behind her, either as a decoration or a day-cycle simulation. "Hi, Lyle. Can you see me okay?"

"Yeah," Lyle said, slumping in his chair. "The place is pretty."

"It's a shared," Mercy said. "The Concept of Sisterhood is supplying my runtime for amateur in-house sim engineering of the place, and they're all so nice, it's just perfect."

"It's like, what, a nunnery?"

"No, no," laughed Mercy. "Conceptuals don't do nunneries. It is single-gendered but only residentially; I've seen men coming and going since I transferred in. It's a group home sort of place for silicized Conceptual Christians who don't want the isolation of private environments and prefer to live with others who have the shared values."

"Is everything you do about being a Conceptual?" wondered Lyle without thinking.

"No," said Mercy tartly. "But my social worker says that it is a normal side effect of having recently thresholded - insofar as there is any normalcy in these cases - that some of my traits will be more dominant than they should be until I've spent more time as a person and filled in the vague impressions that are passing for much of my history. And you as my sim programmer will of course know exactly what traits those will be - the very ones you oriented the sim around."

Oops.

"Yeah," Lyle muttered, looking away.

"So this is really a very good place for me to start out, while I'm finishing school if not longer, because it doesn't matter that I cannot

for the life of me remember the plots of my favorite books even though I could have sworn I read a lot, or that I cannot ride a bicycle despite being able to tell you how old I was when I learned," said Mercy primly. "But I can recite with nearly word-perfect accuracy all the important works of my reverend namesake. So I get along very well with the Sisterhood ladies. And you know what else my sim was oriented around, Lyle?"

"Mom and Dad," he said.

"That's right. If you did not want to have to talk about Dad, you should not have simulated an alternate universe in which he kept his boyhood religion as an adult. I really hope not to ever pull this card again, because I do generally like existing and I am not angry at you for simming me. But I feel like putting me in touch with Dad is on your short list of further obligations given that you have done so." Mercy snapped her fingers twice and a screen hovered in front of her hand. She tapped it; Lyle couldn't see what she was doing from his vantage point, but when she was done she had a glass of lemonade. With a straw. She dismissed the screen by bumping her hand into its side, and sipped. "Well?"

Lyle looked at the farmhouse beyond his - sister. His twin, born days ago and two mental years younger, born after her mother's death and never having drunk real lemonade in her life.

"How's the lemonade?"

"Not bad. Food's fairly common to sim and there's lots of prior art, I didn't even have to adjust it, the Concept of Sisterhood is subscribed to a standard package. You're stalling, Lyle."

"I'll talk to him."

"Thank you. If you can just get him to the point where he will in fact read a message I send him then I'll consider your obligation

discharged, I don't need you to walk him blindfolded into the lab for a surprise."

Lyle snorted. "I'll do my best."

"Thank you, Lyle."

"Don't get used to calling me that. I might change it."

"Oh?" she asked, inviting, blinking at him. He didn't like to look directly at her. She looked too *pretty*, she looked like a bad dream, and it was his own fault. Had he been hoping she'd make major cosmetic changes once she was rendered in silico? She might have conjured up "longstanding" insecurities if she'd spent longer in sim and expected to find some, but apparently as it was she liked how she looked just fine. If he just focused on her hair - he'd never worn his hair like that.

"It's - I don't know, maybe I'll tell you later. I might change it, is all."

"That's entirely your prerogative, of course," Mercy said. "Do you want to meet any of the Sisterhood?"

Lyle shook his head.

"All right then, I'm going to finish writing up my entrance essays so they know what classes to put me in come fall, and you're going to go talk to Dad."

He nodded.

She reached for the camera drone and the picture on his screen winked out.

His - their - dad had moved to a smaller apartment after Mom died. This meant that Lyle did not have to walk through his mom's garden

smelling all her favorite flowers.

This didn't prevent the elevator ride from *feeling* like a walk through the garden, feeling like any minute one of his parents would yell out his name.

He might change it. Again. Insofar as "Lyle" was a change.

He walked to his dad's apartment. The old man didn't like text for anything important and was too hard of hearing for a phone call. The bus and a short hike was the lesser of available evils.

Are you one of those people who hates text channels?

Yeah, sis, I come by it honestly...

Knock knock.

Come on, asshole, I looked up your work hours, have the courtesy to be home.

Lyle knocked louder, and then the door opened.

And there was Dr. Arthur Long.

Who just sort of looked at him, because of course saying *son* was beyond him and Lyle's chosen name had not had any of its desired effect on his parents except to strike them dumb.

"What is it?" Arthur said, eventually.

"It's kind of a big deal," said Lyle. "Can I come in?"

And Arthur stood aside and Lyle went in and sat in the breakfast nook, acutely conscious of his binder and the picture from third grade on the mantelpiece and the name his father wouldn't say.

Arthur sat across from him.

"What is it?" he repeated.

"Uh, you know I major in sim engineering," said Lyle.

"I do."

"You know if you run a sim there's a chance the people in it will notice they exist and sort of - wake up. Threshold."

"It's confusing how you say 'wake up' for leaving a sim or being self-aware in one, but yes, I read, get on with it," said Arthur.

"Someone in my thesis project thresholded."

Arthur's eyes narrowed. "Someone. Did you sim me - no, your mother, did you sim Anne - you know it's against the Prophet's law -"

Lyle shook his head. "I mean, sort of, but you and Mom were incidental to the setup and didn't threshold. There isn't a you or a her running around in silico."

"What did you do?"

Lyle swallowed. *Short list of further obligations.*

"I simmed a version of myself in a world where Mom had converted instead of you."

Lyle wasn't sure if he was imagining the look of disgust on his father's face. "And - the sim woke up?"

The delightful avoid-the-pronoun dance now contagious to Mercy, who was perfectly, tweakfully feminine. "She," bit out Lyle. "She's a she, her name is Mercy, and she woke up. She asked me to tell you so that she could send you a message without being written off as a liar. I hope you know I wouldn't come here for a prank." Wouldn't come here for anything except owing his sister all the favors in the world.

"I - see."

"She's very nice. Very Conceptual Christian."

"A sim of a world in which you aren't completely godless, now that's an interesting look at your mind," murmured Arthur.

"She's really not me. And I'm not sure if she believes in God as an entity or just conceptually -" Why was he letting himself get drawn into this? Mercy could explain herself just fine. Mercy was a sim eng major too. Mercy was the daughter he'd always wanted, and if having Mercy got Dad to realize that the one he'd actually raised from infancy was a *son* then maybe they could have conversations that lasted longer than ten minutes without devolving. Lyle stood up. "That's all I had to say."

"L-" began Arthur, and he cut himself off.

"For *fuck's* sake, Dad," Lyle said, inevitably, "you called me Lyle for seventeen years. Why can't you do it now that it's not short for something else?"

"You know why, and you keep asking that question," Arthur said.

Lyle turned to go. Mercy couldn't call him negligent, now, there was no reason to stay.

"Your mother wanted to name you after a flower," Arthur continued.

"We don't live in a world where you can name *boys* after flowers," snapped Lyle, and he shut the door behind him.

I told him.

Thanks, Lyle.

I told you not to get used to calling me that, he wrote.

Why? It's a perfectly nice name. And didn't you choose it?

He paused. He paced. The pocket computer didn't bleep at him; she was waiting patiently.

Because I thought, when I picked it, that it being a lot like my birth name would help people adjust, and it didn't.

She didn't reply immediately. Maybe she was doing sim work for the Concept of Sisterhood or something.

He added, *It actually did make it easier on my friends, I think, but it didn't help with my parents at all. Dad doesn't call me anything anymore.*

Well, Mercy replied, I'll see if I can work on him, once I've established some basic relationship.

*The hell of it is began Lyle, and then he looked at the word "hell" and erased it and replaced it with *The thing is, I really liked my name. I liked everything about it except that it was a girl's name and I couldn't keep it and get people to take me seriously as a guy. Except Mom never did and Dad still doesn't.**

I'll help you if I can.

Thanks.

But of course I won't consider you obligated to pursue more of a relationship with Dad if it's uncomfortable, even if I do make progress.

*Thanks, Lyle repeated. And then, *If you were more conventionally my sister you'd know what my name was.**

I know what your name is, Mercy replied.

Yeah, but right now I like you more than anyone else in my family and it bugs me that Dad knows what he's just barely not saying and you have no idea. He might refer to me by birth name in his messages, even.

You may tell me if you like, of course.

Lyle thought about it. Then he tapped out, They named me after a flower. Did your version of Mom have a garden?

I think so. I think I can guess. Thank you, Lyle.

He smiled. You're welcome.

Rings

"Mom," said Celia. "I'm gay."

Maureen blinked at her daughter. It was a very classic picture: mother sat on the sofa. Daughter stood across the coffee table from her looking nervous and determined. "I'm - I will always love you," Maureen said, "and, and I accept this as part of who you - I don't really know what to say here, but I'm fine with it, Celia."

"I wasn't finished," Celia said. "I'm gay and I have a girlfriend and I love her and you can't move me to Montana, I won't leave her, you can't -"

"Celia," Maureen interrupted. "I didn't know that when I took the job, and even if I had, it wouldn't get me my old one back. I didn't know when I closed the deal on the *house* -"

"I won't leave her! I'll move in with Dad!"

"Your father can barely take care of himself, let alone you."

"He has an apartment. I'll help uncle Joe check up on him and sleep on the couch. I'm seventeen, Mom, I can feed myself and make sure Dad doesn't skip his meds -"

"Celia," sighed Maureen again. "You and - I'm guessing it's Shula, is it Shula?"

Celia nodded, jaw tight. "I *love* her."

"You'll be able to talk on the phone and -"

"That's not *enough* !"

"- and then you'll go off to college and I'm not going to object if it's the same one -"

"She isn't going to *go* to college right away, she's going to take a year off and travel, you're not even paying attention -"

"- but we are moving to Montana, I have sole custody for a very good reason, and while I am *sorry* to be taking you away from your girlfriend, I already knew you and Shula were close and it doesn't outweigh -"

Celia drowned her out with a shriek. "You're impossible! What am I, *furniture*? It's easier to unbolt me from the wall than even consider my feelings? I'm going out with Shula, *don't* wait up." She stormed out; Maureen didn't try to prevent her.

Shula was waiting in her car at the curb. "Did it work?" she asked through the open window.

Celia got into the passenger seat, slumping aggressively. "No. I really thought it would. She's fine about the lesbian thing, but it didn't *help* and - I thought it would help."

Shula put a hand on her shoulder. "I thought so too. You don't think that with a little more time she'd come around...?"

"No." Celia shook her head. "Maybe if I'd told her months ago before *she* told me we were *moving*. Like that's reasonable." She hugged Shula's arm. "Where are we going?"

"Dinner. You'll see," said Shula. "Put your seatbelt on."

Celia did. "You're not going to dump me over the long dista-"

"Oh no *sweetie* of course not," exclaimed Shula, pulling into the street. "I was never going to *dump* you. Did it sound like that?"

"It sounded pretty dire when you were telling me I'd better come out in case that helped."

" *I'd* come out if it would help get us moved to Montana with you, but my parents would be harder nuts to crack than yours."

"And you've got a sister, she has a fiancé, it'd be just the same for her -"

"Amrika could move out if she had to, she could get a different job if Dad moved the company, she's nineteen. It's not like you where you *can't* stay behind. She wouldn't let you move in with your dad?"

"She has full custody for a very good reason," said Celia in mocking imitation. "Honestly, he's never *hurt* anybody."

"I *would* be worried, a little," Shula admitted, "but you could just sleep over at my place whenever you wanted if it got dicey, as long as my parents didn't know what was going on, and they're good at not knowing what's going on."

"Well, she's not going to let me. I don't want to talk about this anymore. What's for dinner?"

"You'll see," said Shula.

Dinner was Italian. *Fancy* Italian. Celia wasn't sure how Shula got the money to take her to such nice places when her parents thought they were just friends - sure, the Alis were rich, but didn't Shula have to account for her allowance's disappearance? - but the food was delicious and the waiters were too well-trained to remark on their holding hands across the table. Candlelight flickered in the little rubies set in the stacks of yellow-gold rings Shula always had around her middle fingers, and in her dark, dark eyes.

They didn't drive anywhere right away after they'd finished their tiramisu, just sat in the back of Shula's car, cuddled together like

they might fall asleep, Celia breathing the hot ginger smell of Shula's shoulder and Shula with her fingers tangled in dishwater-blonde waves of Celia's hair.

"I guess we could probably do this at my house, now," Celia mumbled.

"But only for as long as your mother wanted to let us," Shula said. "I don't believe it's any of her business how long I want to hold you."

Celia giggled. "You're so warm. I could doze off."

"So doze off," Shula purred.

And Celia closed her eyes and nuzzled her girlfriend and did exactly that.

Carefully, without disturbing Celia's position, Shula lifted one hand to her mouth and twisted the ring close to her knuckle around until the ruby was palm-side.

Abandoning her faintly accented English in favor of, not her parents' Arabic, but another language entirely, she murmured into the ring.

"Lyne."

"Princess?"

"I need you to come down. In the next twenty minutes if you can, in the next two days if you can't."

"Yes Princess. I'll be down in ten. Alone?"

"Alone. Have someone trustworthy standing by at your station, you'll be here for a while."

"Yes Princess."

"Report in when you arrive. Buzz first, don't talk, in case I'm accompanied."

"Yes Princess."

"And bring a sleeper. ...Two. And an English ring, American standard, the best one you can get, delay arrival if you have to for that."

"Yes Princess," Lyne said again, and the conversation was over. Carefully, gently, Shula turned the ring back around, and stroked Celia's hair, and breathed slow, deep breaths to calm herself.

"It'll be okay, sweetie," she murmured.

When Celia woke, she was in the passenger seat, wearing her seatbelt, in her driveway.

Shula was standing on the doorstep, talking to Maureen. Celia rubbed her eyes and let herself out of the car.

"Hi sweetie," Shula said. "I hope you don't mind that I thought I'd give talking to your mom a try."

"Um, that's fine," Celia blinked. "Hi Mom."

"Hello, Celia," Maureen said. "I'm sorry about earlier. Look, I'll investigate some alternative arrangements, all right? And keep you up to date on what I find. There might be a way for me to work remotely for the first few months, sublet the house, something like that. If it can't last until you've finished high school or at least turned eighteen, then I'll reconsider letting you live with your father, as long as your uncle Joe thinks it would be all right."

Celia stared. "Uh. Okay. Um, that would be great." She looked wide-eyed at Shula - what could Shula have *possibly* said? She was persuasive, but convincing someone else's mom to reverse

apparently firm plans was a bit beyond winning in debate club. "Really great. Thanks Mom." She found Shula's hand with hers and squeezed. "Thanks, Shula."

"Hey, I'm not letting you disappear without a fight," Shula said, kissing Celia's temple.

Celia giggled and hugged her. And then Shula kissed her goodnight while Maureen slipped into the house. Shula left. Celia, in a burst of filial gratitude, did math homework she'd postponed all weekend, and went to bed.

Maureen woke up in the dark.

The air smelled faintly sulfurous, she was on some kind of cross between a down comforter and a beanbag, she couldn't remember anything after Celia had gone to dinner with Shula, and there was no light *at all*.

She squinted, she squinted *harder*, and finally she gave up on her eyes and started feeling around on the beanbag-thing. It was comfortable enough, but she didn't have one of these at home. Where *was* she? In all places within immediate reach there was only more beanbag-thing, more darkness. She crawled in a random direction: beanbag, beanbag, beanbag - wall. Stone, flat but not polished? That roughened kind of glass? She wasn't sure. She patted herself down for the lighter she sometimes had in her pocket, but on inspection these weren't her clothes. They didn't quite fit. T-shirt, jeans, socks, no shoes. The underwear might have been hers, she couldn't be sure without *looking*.

She coughed into her hand. This wasn't getting her anywhere - what, was she expecting a *lightswitch*, when she'd obviously been drugged or something - "H-hello?"

"Hello, Ms. Lister," said a voice from somewhere to Maureen's left. It sounded British. "Do you need something?"

What a bizarre question. Did she *need* something. "I - light? And -"

Before she could name another thing she needed, lights came up - scone flames, blindingly orange, in slanting rows on each wall. She flung her hands over her eyes and tried to peek in little increments. "And - and where am I, what's going on?"

"You are the guest of the First Princess ya Fahai," said the voice. Maureen squinted between her fingers. There was a dark shape; she couldn't focus well enough in the firelight to make out whether she was dealing with a CIA agent or a little green man.

"...Why?"

"The Princess's reasons have not been disclosed to me," said the figure.

"What does the - the princess - even have to do with me?" wondered Maureen, bewildered. She could open her eyes most of the way, now. The shape was definitely humanoid, probably male, wearing black floaty robes that were only slightly darker than his skin and close-cropped hair. "I've never heard of any princess."

"The Princess is courting your daughter."

"... *Shula* kidnapped me?"

"The Princess did not personally lay a hand on you," said the persony-sort-of-thing. There were some people who naturally produced that much melanin, but they still tended to have whites in their eyes: he did not.

"Had me kidnapped. *Shula* ? Where *am* I?"

"In her private estate."

"Well, I - don't want to be in her private estate. Who are *you* , why did she kidnap me -"

"The Princess did not personally -"

"- why did she have me kidnapped, and since when is Shula a princess?"

"The Princess was born a princess," said the black-eyed... person.
"Naturally. And I am Cait."

Which was apparently a boy's name for black-eyed persons. If this was a boy. "And why. Why did she have me kidnapped." It would make perfect sense for the answer to be *because I'm dreaming* but it didn't feel like a dream.

"The Princess's reasons have not been disclosed to me."

"Is this about the move to Montana? Why does a - a princess care if I move to - Oh my God is Celia all right -"

"Your daughter's safety is absolutely guaranteed, Ms. Lister."

" *Right now that's not very reassuring!* "

The black-eyed thing - Cait - was impassive.

"I want to go home."

No reaction.

"I *need* to go home, take me home."

"You are the guest of the Princess."

" *This is not how you treat a guest!* "

"If you require something that I *can* provide, of course I will bring it to you," said Cait the black-eyed thing.

"Who's watching my daughter? Shula can't watch my daughter, Shula's barely older than she is -"

"You have been replaced for what is likely a temporary period," Cait said.

"Replaced. *Replaced?*"

"Replaced," agreed Cait serenely.

"With *what*?"

"Another of the Princess's servants has assumed your shape. You may communicate with her if you wish to make it easier for her to avoid alarming your daughter. The Princess has suggested that her ability to coach your replacement may be incomplete."

"If I wish to - *excuse* me?"

"It is possible that your daughter will notice any failure of your replacement to mimic you," explained Cait. "You may speak to your replacement while your daughter is not present in order to prevent her from being dismayed."

"I will do no such thing!"

The lights went out.

Maureen woke up in the dark. The air smelled faintly sulfurous, she was on some kind of cross between a down comforter and a beanbag, she couldn't remember anything after Celia had gone to dinner with Shula, and there was no light *at all* .

"It's weird, though," Celia told Shula at lunch on Monday, picking at her baked beans. "What did you even say to her?"

"I don't remember. I'm sure it was very sappy but I can't recite it," laughed Shula.

"It must have really been something."

"I was really motivated!" Shula giggled.

"Maybe I should have tried talking to her longer last night instead of stomping out of the house?" Celia mused. "...You didn't offer her money, did you, please say you -"

Shula shook her head. "Not a penny. Besides, I didn't have a chance to ask my parents about it. They don't give me enough spending money to justify *that*. I think she just really had a change of heart."

"It's pretty amazing. *You're* pretty amazing." By longstanding agreement they didn't kiss at school, just knocked their shoes together when it was on their minds. Celia bumped her sneaker into Shula's boot and Shula smiled at her.

"Come over after school today," Shula suggested.

"Today? Right after Mom's big three-sixty?"

"One-eighty."

"One-eighty? It'd seem like I was ditching her."

"Really? I mean, she approves of, you know, us," said Shula. "I don't think she'd mind. Call her and ask if you want." A little kick to the side of Celia's shoe.

Celia blushed. "Okay, I'll call her. Your folks won't mind?"

"Nah."

"Okay," Celia repeated.

When European history let out at the end of the day Celia dialed home and asked, and Maureen said that of course she could see Shula whenever she liked, and by the way, uncle Joe said this would be a fine day to visit her dad if she wanted to get dinner with him and she wasn't expected home until bedtime.

Okay. That was nice.

Maybe she's just overcompensating for not knowing what to do with a gay kid?

Celia called her uncle Joe, who suggested that they could get Chinese food, and since the day was already going *so well* Celia threw in, "Can I bring my girlfriend?"

"You want to bring a friend?" asked Uncle Joe.

Ugh. "My *giiiiirl* friend."

"Has your dad met this friend before?"

"A couple of times, yeah," sighed Celia. If he was going to be willfully obtuse about it then yelling *I'M A LESBIAN* into her cellphone wouldn't improve the situation.

"Then sure, bring your friend, if he knows her. Chinese for everybody."

"Garlic eggplant here I come." Celia hung up. Probably too much to hope for that everyone would react as well as her mom had. Maybe her dad would do better? Of course, maybe her dad would have another psychotic episode, that was always possible. Yeah, that would be fun. *Celia, what happened before your dad started thwacking the couch with the broom? Well, Uncle Joe, I told him I was gay.*

Celia found Shula in the art room, where the teacher would often let her stay late to put in extra time on her paintings - the art teacher *swooned* over Shula's paintings, all shades of dark and flame, swooping strange architecture against starless night. Celia had a triptych of them in her room - *The Estate, The Crown, The Palace* . "Shula, my mom said I can go home with you. And Uncle Joe says you can come to dinner with us and my dad."

"Great!" said Shula, and she put a thin eyelash-shape of yellow on a torch in the foreground of her current canvas, then cleaned her brush. "I can put this down here. We can raid Amrika's nail polish collection, she got some of the cool magnetic stuff."

"She won't mind?"

"Nah." Shula had her hair tied back to keep it out of her paint; she untied the ponytail and shook out a sheet of midnight. "She's never gotten on my case about it. Later!" she added to the art teacher, who waved at her as she went with Celia out of the room.

Shula drove them to the Ali household, which was an imposing manor on a lawnmower-gridded tract of green, just far enough into the suburbs to allow that much square footage and a fountain. They didn't have servants except in the modern sense of employing a gardening service and cleaning ladies, but every time Celia walked in the front door she sort of expected a butler to take her backpack and offer her a glass of water. Mr. Ali was home, in the parlor on his phone, pacing, shouting at an employee in Arabic; Dr. Ali was not in evidence; Amrika's keys were not on the hook, so presumably she was elsewhere too. Shula didn't hold Celia's hand while they walked past her dad, but made up for this lack once they'd gone up the stairs and around the corner to Shula's room.

They painted their nails with Amrika's cool magnetic nail polish - Shula in all gold, Celia alternating pink and blue. They locked the door and sat in the window seat and kissed as though Celia really

was going to be spirited away any day. They unlocked the door and played chess (Shula won). They did some of their homework, Celia with her head in Shula's lap ("should we lock the door?" "nah, he won't think anything of it"). And then they got back in the car and went to Celia's dad's apartment.

David lived alone, but in the same building and just down the hall from his brother Joe. The place was usually kept to acceptable levels of cleanliness, if profound levels of disorganization; they stepped over shoes on the way into the kitchen and found Joe clearing empty envelopes and old napkins off the table to make way for takeout.

"Hi, Dad," Celia said, plopping into the chair next to her father. "You remember Shula."

"Yes," David agreed.

"Uh, when Mom called earlier did you talk to her or just uncle Joe?"

"I haven't talked to Maureen," blinked David.

"Yes you did, Dave," said Joe, putting down plates and forks. "You were on with her for fifteen, twenty minutes before you handed her over."

"That wasn't Maureen," said David.

Joe hesitated in distributing containers of rice. "Dave..."

David shook his head. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

"You talked to Maureen for about fifteen minutes, after lunch," Joe said. "And then you gave me the phone, and I said the girls here could come over for dinner. Remember?"

"I'm fine," snapped David, and he took a container of eggdrop soup.

Joe looked apologetically at Celia, then at Shula.

"What do you mean, it wasn't her?" Shula asked.

"Never mind," muttered David.

"Did, um, did she tell you anything interesting," said Celia. "Or surprising?"

David frowned at her. "Like what?"

Shula tapped her toes to Celia's twice.

Once was a kiss. Twice was *remember we don't literally kiss, here* . In school; under the noses of Shula's very assimilated but still quite Muslim parents; in front of Celia's dad, apparently.

"Nothing," said Celia.

They ate Chinese food, subdued. Joe kept looking nervously at his brother, who was staring resolutely at his dinner. Shula was frowning thoughtfully at David too. Celia flicked her eyes from girlfriend to father to uncle, unsure what to do. Sometimes visits with her dad went great. Sometimes this happened. Sometimes Joe could judge when it was a good day and sometimes he couldn't.

They opened fortune cookies. Celia's said *You will explore new places* .

And Shula took her home.

It was pitch dark.

Cait walked through the introduction pattern with Ms. Lister again. This was the second time she'd asked for a meal after asking for light, but apart from a brief back and forth about whether Cait would have poisoned the food, it didn't seem to change anything about the trajectory of her questions or her answers when he gave her bread

and meat and vegetables early in the conversation. It changed nothing if he traded rings with another estate-keeper and spoke in another accent. It changed nothing if he appeared in a female shape instead, or if he moved his class marker from the color of his eyes (which she once remarked upon) to somewhere less conspicuous. He didn't have many degrees of freedom; the Princess still hadn't told him exactly what she was up to, so he couldn't make up particularly sophisticated stories justifying the need to help Lyne impersonate Ms. Lister.

Ms. Lister declined, again.

Cait wiped her, again.

Ms. Lister fell asleep after a few moments' groggy blinking. It was a reasonable hour for that in the time zone she'd come from. Cait twisted the ring on his thumb, all the way around and then halfway back.

There was a delay, and:

"Report."

"Princess," Cait said, "Ms. Lister is still unrepsonsive. Without more information about the situation or leeway on her treatment, I do not believe I can extract her cooperation in a timely manner."

"I'll work around it. You can stop wiping her and just keep her comfortable. If she'll help later that's still useful, let me know. Is there anything else?"

"No, Princess."

Cait waited deferentially for five minutes of dead silence on her end and then turned his ring back to its original position. He watched Maureen sleep in the darkness. She'd derived, several times, in bits and pieces that she'd spoken aloud, that the Princess must have

kidnapped her because of her desire to move to "Montana", but Cait was not as well informed of Earthly politics as Lyne. Perhaps Montana was dangerous and the Princess feared for her consort's safety. Perhaps the Princess's consort did not wish to go to Montana and Ms. Lister had been planning to abduct her.

It would have needed to be a fairly serious problem for the Princess to be unable to address it with sufficient selective memory deletion, on her own recognizance. She needed to be limited and discreet with her use of her resources. Even having Lyne away and Cait holding down the Estate was a risk.

The Princess's little brothers and sisters might notice that she was struggling.

Celia packed her things.

Just the important stuff.

Dad's apartment was small.

One box of clothes, one box of books, all her school stuff in her backpack. Pillow, quilt, vine-print bag of toiletries, box marked "Misc." for her laptop and last-gen Nintendo and two stuffed animals and winter coat and odds-and-ends. Everything else that hadn't gone into the discard bin was going into a storage unit until Celia had her own place to spread out into. Shula was helping; so was uncle Joe. Maureen was on the phone in another room, voice low, talking to the school authorities or the realtor or her new boss or something.

"Your dad will like having you around more, really," Joe told her. "But you've got to be patient with him. You're old enough to be responsible about that, now."

Celia nodded. This was her idea, wasn't it? Sleep on Dad's couch, make sure he took his pills, do his errands occasionally so uncle Joe could pick up more hours at work, stay in town, stay with Shula. Packing felt weird anyway. She taped "Misc." shut. Shula nudged their shoes together and picked the box up to go stuff it in the back of Maureen's station wagon.

Once everything was loaded up, Shula, who had to be at dinner with her parents and sister and sister's fiancé, went home; Joe drove Celia to the apartment and they hauled everything up. Celia got to unpacking. It took a couple hours. She shelved her books in the box; she put her clothes in the front closet where her dad had cleared away a couple of shelves.

Her phone buzzed in her purse. Shula had texted: *remember you can sleep over basically whenever you want!*

Celia looked around the apartment and went to take inventory of the kitchen. Uncle Joe was in there, cleaning the microwave.

"If you ever need to come over to my place for a night -" he began.

"- then I'll go to Shula's instead, because you have *cats*, uncle Joe," Celia said. "I'd sneeze myself to death."

"I could shut them up in my room overnight, they usually sleep there anyway."

"They've been all over the apartment, it won't help. But thanks," said Celia.

"Do you want to run out to the grocery store?" Joe asked, as Celia peered into the fridge.

"That'd be good." Dad had storebought potato salad and half a premade lasagna and ketchup and a box of questionable strawberries. Wilting lettuce, soy sauce. Sliced cheese, deli turkey,

pickles. "Uh, Mom said she gave you some money - or sent Dad the money, I wasn't totally clear - to cover expenses."

"Yep. Don't worry about it, get whatever you'll eat. Maybe go easy on the caviar."

"Should we wake up Dad and see if he wants to come?"

Joe shook his head. "Let him nap. Generally. Let him nap."

"Okay."

Joe took her shopping. She put everything away. Joe left for work. Celia dug into her backpack and found some homework to do.

This is weird, she thought, mechanically conjugating Spanish verbs. Why did she let me...?

She's not okay about the gay thing at all, is she. She's not kicking me out though. Technically. I asked.

She's barely talked to me since.

Better not tell Dad. I have nowhere else to live.

David woke up slowly. It was hard to tell from the inside when exactly he woke up. Everything was foggy. His head hurt. The clock said a quarter after five in the afternoon. The sticky note on the clock said in his own handwriting *Celia moving in today* .

Right. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, tried to control the shaking in his hands to no avail.

He looked at the wall. He ran through a sort of checklist in his head. He never believed anything that he didn't think was true, but if he believed anything that would get him in trouble if he were in a hospital, he could sometimes tell which things those were. And

sometimes he could tell Joe about it. And then his psychiatrist could give him more antipsychotics and he could sleep more and shake more and let his brain erode into gray soup, but Celia had moved in, so better to be that little bit more careful.

His name was David and his daughter Celia had just moved in. Safe.

It was April. Celia's birthday was in August. She'd be eighteen. Safe.

Celia had moved in because she didn't want to go to Montana with his ex. Safe.

He hadn't talked to Maureen. About Celia moving in, or anything, not for weeks. ...Questionable. Joe disagreed. But that was David thinking something *had not* happened, rather than thinking that something *had*. Joe had never had a psychotic break in his life but he didn't necessarily have a perfect recall. Probably safe.

Celia's friend Shula was an alien with mystical powers who -

That didn't make any sense. Shula had a human family. Aliens with mystical powers would only embed themselves into human families to seek mates. Celia didn't fit the profile, so an alien wouldn't waste any time on her. David didn't have any idea why he'd thought that in the first place; it didn't hold together.

...Talking about aliens with mystical powers *would* probably get him in trouble in a hospital. But he didn't really believe it, because it didn't make sense in terms of Shula's motive. And he could dismiss the belief by thinking about it and realizing it didn't hold together, it wasn't a *sticky* delusion. Having identified the flaw in its logical coherence, he wasn't motivated to do anything about it, let alone endanger his kid. Probably just fine.

Joe would be at work at this hour. He was a security guard. Safe.

David tried to smooth his hair, gave up, put his slippers on and went out of his bedroom. Celia was in the kitchen, he could hear her. He ducked into the bathroom and came out again just as she said, "Hi Dad. Do you want some tuna?"

He smiled at her tiredly. "Love some. Thanks."

She gave him a bowlful of tuna with hardboiled eggs and pasta twists in it, and he ate it and it was good. He could do this.

Maureen was getting sort of crazily accustomed to the place.

Cait was always around; if he slept, he did it whenever she did. Sometimes he spoke into the rings on his fingers, always in a language she couldn't understand. Sometimes he would leave her alone in a room, but he'd appear at her elbow if she tried to leave; if he was going to be busy for a long enough time she was locked into whatever room she was in at the moment. After she'd been there for several days his accent suddenly went from Scottish to Southern.

It was always night. The building was warm, there were hot drafts blowing through the vents (too small to cartoonishly crawl through), it was always lit with the fire sconces. There weren't lightswitches; she had to ask Cait, every time, although he was pretty quick to anticipate her if she got up and moved.

She'd tried to make a run for it once. The lights had all gone out as soon as she'd bolted, and she'd crashed into a wall; when she'd found the door, it wouldn't open; and then Cait had come up behind her and asked if she was quite finished.

She'd attacked him, then, finding him by his voice, and he'd just sort of stood there, immobile, while she beat her fists against his chest. He was like concrete. Her hands ached. She stopped.

"I do apologize for the necessity," he'd said.

"Then let me go *home* ."

"I cannot."

So she continued to live in the windowless firelit - place. Estate. She mostly stayed in the one room, with the cushy beanbag-esque thing taking up most of the floor; Cait would bring her food there, plain but recognizable and edible. There was an ensuite bathroom with bizarre plumbing but not so bizarre that she was forced to ask for help figuring it out. If she asked for a book or a newspaper there would be a delay but eventually she'd get it. She started asking in batches. He wouldn't bring her her own clothes, but he'd get her others, so she had changes of outfit available.

Much of the time she couldn't force herself to read. Too worried about Celia, about the carefully balanced elements of her life collapsing - what would the realtor think, her boss, what was the *date* , was she already supposed to be starting? It was always night; Cait didn't seem to know how to operate a calendar. Maybe it was already May. Maybe Celia had finished school, given up on her mother reappearing, gone to a foster home...? Or her father's. David meant well, Maureen supposed, but...

"So Shula's a princess," Maureen said to Cait one - night. Always night.

"Yes," said Cait.

"But her parents - I've met her parents, once or twice. Inabah's a doctor, I think Ahamad owns an electrician business, something like that."

Cait was silent.

"And they're from Yemen. I think Yemen's got a president. If it technically has kings and queens and princesses too, left over or

something, they're not the kind with spooky magic servants who kidnap people for them."

Cait, eyes ink-black from corner to corner, regarded her neutrally.

"When Celia was - five or six she'd get angry at me and tell me that her *real* mother was a fairy queen who was going to come get her sooner or later. She was wrong, I would know. Shula..."

Cait's head tilted, just a fraction.

"...was absolutely right. And she knows it. And she can call her goons to kidnap me and hold me for God knows how long if I get in her way. What does she *want* with my daughter?"

"You know that I am not at liberty to answer all of your questions," Cait said.

"I've gotten that impression. How were Inabah and Ahmad convinced, is she a *changeling*, do you have the real Shula shut up somewhere in another wing...?"

"Apart from the Princess's servants, such as myself, you are the only person on the Estate."

"Is the real Shula *dead*?"

"The royal family does not condone biological murder."

"What the hell is *biological* murder?"

"Killing a person's physical body."

"As opposed to what *other* kind of murder?"

This one Cait didn't answer.

Maureen flopped backwards into the beanbag thing. It was really cozy. "Are Shula's real parents, what, paying the Alis to raise her?"

Silence.

"Turn the lights out, I'm going to sleep," growled Maureen. The fact that he was keeping her prisoner was mildly less grating when he'd respond to even the most brusque orders (within the scope of his *other* instructions) with smooth obedience. No Zimbardo prison guard was Cait. The sconces went out. The door opened and closed again, leaving Maureen alone.

She stared into the darkness and rolled over and wondered where she was.

Celia settled into a pattern. She looked after her dad with uncle Joe's help; she kept up all right in school; she hung out with Shula and slept over a couple times a week. Shula turned eighteen in May. School let out. They spent most of every day together; Shula bought her ice cream, and took her to movies and the water park and - one weekend, with her sister Amrika along but unobservant - to the beach. Shula tutted over her sunburns more than was really warranted so that Celia would let her put sunscreen on her. (*Shula* didn't burn. She wasn't *that* dark, but apparently it was enough. Celia put sunscreen on her anyway. "Anyone can get cancer, Shula.")

Celia called her mother once a week. The conversations were brief. Celia asked polite questions about how Montana was, but Maureen tended to steer the conversation back to how Celia was doing, so Celia told her about the creepy feeling of seaweed on her leg, the weird flavors of gelato Shula had dared her to try, how rude that one guy in the line for the water slide was. She tried to strike a balance between conspicuously not bringing up Shula and talking about her constantly despite her suspicion that her mother was not, really, comfortable. She couldn't tell if she was managing.

The summer wore on. Celia looked at colleges, thought about veterinary medicine or maybe dentistry or something, wrote scholarship essays. Shula didn't.

Celia's birthday rolled around. Shula decided to throw her a party, no ifs ands or buts - though Celia was given the choice of a big party, at Shula's house, with school friends, where they would have to be in the closet, or a little celebration picnic, just the two of them, out in the woods.

Celia wanted the picnic. It wasn't like her dad would want to come to a big crowded party, and her mom was out of state. Everybody else could send her a card.

So Shula picked her up, the day Celia turned eighteen, and drove her out to the trail, and they hiked to the picnic spot and set up cake and sparkling grape juice.

The sky was bright and full of puffy, white clouds. Celia shut her eyes and inhaled wind and pine. She licked frosting off her lip.

When she opened her eyes again Shula was beside her, down on one knee.

"Celia," said Shula. She scooped Celia's hand up in her own. "Celia Rhiannon Lister-Altman. Will -"

"Oh my god," breathed Celia.

"- you marry me?" finished Shula, looking up at her hopefully.

"Oh my God, Shula," said Celia. She was proposing with one of those gold-and-ruby rings she always wore. "Shula, we can't."

"Not *here*, obviously we'd have to go somewhere else. Please. I love you, you have no idea, I love you, I love you -"

"Shula -"

" *Please* . Let me put this on you and pretend it's a symbol of our *friendship* or something to anyone who asks and I don't expect to walk you down any aisles anytime soon, but -"

"Shula, I can't, we're *eighteen* ."

"My parents were eighteen," Shula said.

"I'm going to go to college, what if -?"

"That's supposed to make me stop wanting to marry you?" asked Shula, smiling a little.

"We haven't even finished high school. There's a year left. I can't be engaged in high school."

Shula pursed her lips. "You're positive?"

"I'm really sorry - and I want, I want to stay together, *honest* , but it's just too -"

Shula took a deep breath.

And got up and sat down across from Celia on the other side of the picnic table, just like she had been before, and put the ring back on her own hand -

- and took three minutes of memory.

Stress evaporated from Celia instantly. She smiled. She reached for her fork, took another bite of cake.

"Sorry, what were you saying?" Celia asked.

"I think," Shula said, "we should put all the food away so we can snuggle on the picnic blanket without ants stealing our dessert."

Yeah?"

Celia giggled. "Yeah." She snuck another bite of cake and then put its lid back on and put it back in the basket and flopped quite happily onto her girlfriend.

Okay. Time to try something different. Snuggles. Hair-petting.

"What if I didn't take a gap year?" Shula asked.

"Mm?"

"And we went to the same school."

"That'd be nice," Celia yawned. "Heh, maybe we could room together."

"Living in sin," commented Shula.

"Thought you were a secret atheist."

"Yeah, I am, it's just an expression."

"Sure. Living in sin, getting degrees in whatever. It'd be great."

"What if I don't want to live in sin?"

"Are you kidding? You're the one who keeps griping about all the places with beds being too supervised to sin in."

"No, silly," Shula kissed her, "I mean what if I wanna *marry* you."

"What, you want to elope to, what's the nearest state that has it legal? Before we even go to college?"

"I might wanna get *engaged*," Shula murmured.

"For real?"

"Or," Shula said, "you know what -"

She took the ring off her finger.

"Call it a promise ring," said Shula.

"Awww," said Celia. "It breaks up the set though, all your matching rings."

"No it doesn't. Unless you're planning to quit holding my hand."
Shula elbowed her.

"Ha. Okay, fine." Celia presented her hand.

Shula slipped it onto her ring finger. "Mine," she said, kissing that knuckle and then Celia's forehead. "Promise."

"Promise," agreed Celia, giggling, and she tugged Shula closer for a kiss on the lips.

Shula kissed her, and, behind Celia's back, brought her hands together to twist a different ring around, three hundred sixty degrees. While Celia's eyes were still closed -

- the Earth dissolved around them.

"Ms. Lister," said Cait.

"Mm?"

"Your daughter has arrived. You may see her -"

"- just like that I can - what happened - is she all right? -"

"- on a number of conditions."

"...Conditions."

"The Princess requires that everything go smoothly for a certain critical period of time. You may see your daughter if you do not alarm her, nor allude to your having been here for the last several months. If you do either of those things she will not remember the experience, but you will not see her again soon."

"I knew, I knew I was missing time -"

"Very little of it. You have not been wiped since the first several days of your time here."

" *I knew something was up. Is Celia okay?*"

"She is unharmed."

" *Biologically,*" snarled Maureen.

"She is biologically unharmed," conceded Cait.

" *Fuck you all alien things !*"

"I cannot bring you to your daughter in this temperament."

"I'll *bet* you can't." Maureen breathed deep, once, twice, counted to ten. Twenty, thirty. "What am I supposed to tell her if I can't tell her you've been keeping me here?"

"You may - not immediately, but at the appointed time in some hours - describe yourself as voluntarily present to attend her engagement party. If you would prefer not to attend her engagement party you are of course free to miss it."

"Her *engagement* p- what the hell is going on with this place?"

"I believe you will find your access to information much less restricted if you comply with the Princess's requirements."

Maureen's teeth ground together.

"You have time to consider your reply."

"How long?"

"I do not know exactly. I am required elsewhere, but will return when your answer is called for."

And Cait left the room and locked her in.

It actually took Celia half a minute to notice.

Shula was *distracting*, and they were all alone, and the promise ring thing was *sweet*, and *Shula was kissing her* -

So Celia didn't notice right away that they were no longer under the sun, on a picnic blanket.

But eventually she came up for air, and the air tasted strange, so she opened her eyes, and the light wasn't sunny and the sky wasn't blue.

"Shula?" mouthed Celia.

"It's okay," Shula said. "It's okay, you're fine, I won't let anything hurt you. It's okay, sweetie."

"What - happened? Where are we?" asked Celia, not liking how high and pathetic her voice sounded. *I'm cracking up, I'm cracking up just like Dad* -

"It's okay. Sweetie, sweetie." Shula hugged her and Celia leaned on her, hard, because Shula was the only familiar thing in this starless firelit midnight. Shula was calm and Celia wanted to copy her.

"Where are we?" asked Celia again, softly.

"It's complicated. Will you let me start at the beginning?" Shula was raking her fingers through Celia's hair, snuggling Celia's head tight to her shoulder. "It'll make more sense that way."

"I don't understand."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll start from the beginning, Celia, okay?"
Fingernails on scalp. The air smelled like eggs and campfire and dry mineral dust but Shula smelled like ginger, just like always, it was just Shula, her Shula.

Celia nodded.

"My mom and dad aren't my biological parents," Shula said. "They think they are - they're exactly who you always thought, so is Amrika - but I'm from here. This is a different planet."

"How are we breathing?" asked Celia, and then she felt like an idiot and pushed her face harder into Shula's shoulder.

"There's plenty of oxygen," soothed Shula. "It's completely safe. My natural mother's from Earth originally, and she's lived here for hundreds of years."

Celia hiccuped, trying not to freak out worse than she already had. "H-hundreds?"

"Yeah. People live a long time, here." Shula kissed the top of Celia's head. "I'm so glad I can *finally* tell you - I couldn't before but now I can. ...I'm mostly human, to be clear. My mother's all human, my paternal grandfather was all human, so on like that. How are you doing...? I can slow down."

"I'm... Keep going." Shula's hand was still carding through Celia's hair and Celia concentrated as hard as she could on that, not on the sudden teleportation, not on her girlfriend claiming to be from another planet, not the people being hundreds of years old thing.

"Okay. I'm... actually older than you. Please don't be creeped. I don't think I *feel* older than eighteen, if that makes sense, because I've never been treated as older than eighteen in my life. But I'm actually more like, uh, thirty. I lived here for about twelve years -"

"Earth years?"

"Yeah, I'm translating, it's fewer local years. I lived here for about twelve years, and was about as mature as you'd expect a twelve-year-old to be, and then I de-aged and went to live with Mom and Dad, the ones you've met."

"But - why?"

Shula took a deep breath. Celia mimicked her. Deep breaths were supposed to be calming.

"Well," said Shula, "...you know, I practiced, I rehearsed explaining this, and it's still really hard. Can you be patient with me even if it sounds strange?"

"I - yeah." It was still Shula.

"Okay. I'm gonna sort of - zoom in from the big picture. When a planet has life on it for long enough it starts accumulating magic. We don't know exactly how long this takes - our history doesn't stretch that far back and we haven't found that many planets that have any magic sticking to them."

"Okay..."

"The native intelligent species on *this* planet - I'm not sure you could pronounce it. I should have translated it to English ahead of time. I'm making a total hash of this, I'm sorry."

"It's, um, it's all right."

"Call them *plakti*, it's close enough. So, plakti developed on a planet that already had magic stuck to it. An old planet. With an old star. The star's a black hole now, by the way, it's not night, it's just always like this. It's safe, we just orbit it normally."

"Does - does Earth have magic?"

"If it does, it's not much."

"Okay. Plakti, old planet, dead star."

"When the plakti first evolved the star was still alive, but yeah. Growing up on this planet gives particular kinds of magic - the important one for this story is shapeshifting. It turns out that if you are really dumb about how you use shapeshifting, you can forget how to get back to your normal shape, and then you can't have kids."

"Um."

"I know, I know, I didn't *want* to spring this on you or do it so soon, but there's - there's stuff, I'll get there."

Celia nodded numbly.

"There are *no* pure plakti left who can have kids. There are hundreds of millions of plakti, but no *new* ones. They noticed this was going on *just* in time to find *one* who hadn't done any shapeshifting, a few thousand years ago. But there was only one of him."

"Was - he your great-grandfather - or something?"

"Yes. They found another planet, Earth, with people on it, and he *very very carefully* shapeshifted to look like a human, and he placed himself in a human family and grew up there and married a human and took her back here and they had kids. And I'm glossing over a

few years of history lessons but it wound up that he got made king of the plakti."

"Are you saying you're an alien princess."

"Yeah. I am," said Shula.

Celia sat up, away from Shula, slowly. She looked around. There were no visible stars in the sky, no moon. They were on some kind of stone platform, on a cushy plush rectangle, surrounded by torches; more fires dotted the landscape below, it looked like they were on top of a hill or a tower.

"Is this your castle?"

"This is my estate. I don't get the proper castle yet. Mother and Father are still alive."

It would be rude to ask how long they were going to live, probably. "So you had to go live with your mom and dad, and grow up all over again on Earth, and... find... me."

"Yes." Shula had a hopeful look on her face, thrown into soft shadow by the flickering torches. "Exactly."

"We're... we're both girls. *We* can't have kids."

"I spent long enough here first to have plakti magic, and I'm mostly human, which lets me cheat a little on the combining shapeshifting and having kids thing - probably - if it doesn't work there's a kind of a problem but we can figure something out. I can't claim it'd be the most pleasant thing ever, but it'd probably work."

"You'd turn into a guy."

"For maybe thirty seconds, below the waist, yeah. I *really* didn't want to spring this on you but if I fucked up *any* of the," she waved

a hand, "traditions and protocols, before I managed to get you here, with a ring on your finger -"

"When you said you wanted to get married -"

"I meant it."

"When you said *promise ring* -"

"I was kind of reaching, there."

"...if you fucked up a tradition or protocol then...?"

"Then," said Shula, "my little brothers and sisters start a civil war."

David sat bolt upright.

Celia was gone.

...Safe, or not safe? If he went and told Joe that Celia was missing -

Well, that would depend on whether they found her. If it turned out she was at the movies or the pool or the mall - for that matter, if it turned out that she was playing video games on the couch right beyond that door - then, no, not safe, because it would be false and more significant than whether or not he'd talked to Maureen in the past several months (he had not).

If Celia *was* missing -

- then how did David know it?

He'd been asleep. He hadn't seen her disappear.

And Joe hadn't seen him sleeping. If Joe thought -

David got up and paced.

He opened his door: no Celia on the couch, no Celia in the kitchen, no Celia occupying the bathroom. She was, at least, not *home* .

Note on the table: *Gone on a picnic with Shula. Home for dinner.*

That gave him a time frame. He could wait until it was reasonably dinnertime, then go tell Joe - not that Celia was *gone* , necessarily, but that she had said she'd be home for dinner, and was not.

...He decided to call her first, just in case. Picked her out from the contact list with shaky hands.

Voicemail. Joe would think she'd just let it run out of battery. David *knew* better and couldn't say how and if he tried to explain in a hospital to a psychiatrist then -

He tried calling *Shula* . He didn't know what he'd say to her, but he knew she wouldn't answer, anyway -

Voicemail. He let the phone fall from his fingers.

He sat at the kitchen table and stared at the microwave clock, waiting for dinner.

"I need," said Shula, "one more thing from you, and then everything will be calmed down and I will make it all up to you."

"Wh-what do you need?"

"I need to have an engagement party, I need you to be at it, I need you to *swear* up and down to everyone there that *we are going to get married and have babies and you couldn't be happier* ," said Shula. "...Saying we're going to have exactly one baby is also fine, it doesn't have to be lots, *I* have seven siblings not counting Amrika but that's because it took a while for the Catholicism to wear off Mother."

"The *Catholicism* -"

"She was a convert in the era of conquistadors. Mariche native Venezuelan. Got religion, lots of it, married Father back on Earth and got whisked off to be queen of the plakti. I'm being glib, though, the Catholics didn't have that prominent of an opinion on birth control back when there wasn't any. She just likes kids."

"And they left you with Muslims?" blinked Celia.

"The less shapeshifting I had to do to look like Mom and Dad, the better, and the comfier my second childhood, the better, so they left me with rich brown people I kind of resembled in a First World country who were being decent parents to a first daughter. This was before 9/11, they didn't know I'd have that kind of trouble. But we're getting off the subject - the party - please say you'll be at the party. I *have* to show you to Mother and Father and the other heirs - presumptive? They may or may not be technically presumptive under the English meaning. Anyway, the less presumptive they feel after meeting you, the better."

"I don't know how to act around - kings and queens and princes and princesses -"

"Sweetie." Shula wrapped her arms around her and squeezed her. "I've been a princess all along and you impress the hell out of *me*. We'll put you in a pretty dress - no heels, promise - and you don't have to step away from me for even a moment the entire time. Just smile and lean on me and wear the ring. It's so important. Not just to me."

"Why would they start a war...?"

"Usual monarchy reasons. They want the big chair. They were hoping I'd go to Earth and strike out. I had a deadline. If I didn't come back with everything sewn up by then, next eldest - my brother Meer - got a shot."

"You're... thirty, right?"

"...Yes? Please don't dwell on that, I'm not some -"

"It's not that, it's just. Your real parents are hundreds of years old, aren't they? Why did they wait so long to have children? You're the oldest."

"They needed rings for us," Shula said, taking Celia's hand and tapping the ruby. "They got mine fairly early on, but they wanted to have us close enough together that I'd meet all my little siblings before I went off to Earth, so they waited. The ones I'm wearing aren't as scarce. What you've got on now is an immortality ring."

"A -"

"Plakti," said Shula, "don't age."

"They live forever? That's why there are still some after they messed up with shapeshifting...?"

"Yes. *But* they can still die in accidents - or sometimes they just get suicidal. But this is much less frequent than human accidents - because shapeshifting can make a person *really* tough - and less frequent than human suicides - because we've got better ways of dealing with that, too. A small handful of plakti die over the course of entire human generations."

"What does that have to do with the rings, aren't the rings magic...?"

"The rings *are* magic, but unlike some magic they need a source. We *only* get new rings when a plakti decides to take their immortality and sell it."

Celia just stared, completely lost.

"They don't die right away, if they do that. They have a good few hundred years left, and it means that if they get themselves killed in some disastrous accident - falling into the black hole, say - then their immortality doesn't go to waste. The plakti know that they can't just coast forever, not without any new plakti and even very slow attrition. That's what the royal family is for. We're new people."

"If your parents are immortal then why do they need heirs?" wondered Celia.

"They're sharing a ring," Shula said. "They've got a while longer - long enough for every last one of my siblings to run out their own deadline trying to bring back a new king or queen, if it comes down to it, you're not going to be queen next month. Nobody's allowed to be in charge forever, and royalty avoids the obvious shapeshifting-buster dangers more than an average plakti. So instead of having four kids and giving each one an extra ring for a future spouse there's eight kids and I'm sharing mine with you. It'll more than halve your aging rate - you don't ramp up to full speed right away when you take it off. We can swap it back and forth."

Celia looked at the ring. "You're giving up *immortality*?"

"In the long run everyone's going to. The plakti are slowly replacing themselves with collateral descendants of the royal family, see? Instead of getting picked off a few at a time slightly slower and just as inevitably and the entire planet eventually being empty. I'm taking centuries of being queen - and *not starting a war* - and getting to have *you* - over maybe surviving the war and dying alone with an empty title, somewhat later, having never been to Earth. And I'm giving half of it to *you*."

"Never been to - is it hard to travel, am I ever going to see -"

"Oh no sweetie we can go back," soothed Shula, stroking her hair again. "Travel's easy. But if I hadn't been making a full-fledged go at the crown they wouldn't want me hanging around humans in case I

changed my mind. We can visit whenever we want, but, say, my little brother Meer can't go until I'm solidly on the throne."

"Oh."

"You have no idea how good it feels to have all this *crap* off my chest," Shula exhaled. "I love you so *much* and I could barely tell you *anything* ."

"It... sounds hard."

"But let's go get you dolled up for our party. You'll be gorgeous. I know what you like, I have a few options prepped in your size. Come on."

Shula tugged on her hand.

Celia followed helplessly down a flight of stairs lit by flames dancing in grooves in the walls.

It was five forty-five. It wasn't *really* dinnertime yet. David only had one opportunity to sound genuinely like he was worried because Celia wasn't back within the described time of her note rather than madly fretting for other reasons. Six-thirty at least. Seven would be better.

There was a knock at the door.

David opened it, and it was the person who'd been pretending to be Maureen.

"Hello, David," it said.

He just looked at it.

"Celia's having a party," it said. "I think she'd like it if you were there."

Stare.

"I can bring you. Are you up to it?"

Celia was there and this was not Maureen but Maureen was also there and everyone thought he was insane and they were right but he didn't think he was insane just... this... once...

"Yeah," he said.

He probably couldn't do anything but Celia was there -

The dresses were lovely. Celia was having a hard time picking. It didn't help that she kept wondering if she should be doing something other than selecting a pretty princess dress for her impromptu engagement party. Panicking? Fainting? Pinching herself? Checking herself into a mental hospital and stammering her way through a family history, because there were probably *loads* of psychiatrists familiar with the most recent diagnostic and statistical manual on another freaking planet. Even Dad never thought he was literally on another planet.

Shula was flitting around behind her, occasionally issuing instructions to someone just outside the door who Celia hadn't gotten a good look at, occasionally commenting - nervously? Rapidly, anyway - on the wardrobe or other incidentals. "Normally we'd have servants helping but you haven't met them and I want you to be comfortable. The shoes that go with this one are not the friendliest - no heels, but no real arch support either. It depends if you want to dance, whether that matters, I guess. Do you want to dance?"

"I don't know how -"

"It would be the kind of slow-dancing that's just swaying back and forth at most but we can skip it. Oh, here - thank you, Cait - here, Celia, put this on, any finger, this is a ring with the most common

plakti language in it, so you don't have to try to learn it the long way around. There might also be Spanish and some other local languages spoken but it should be *mostly* this one. We can get you more rings but it might be hard to find a Spanish one quickly."

Celia let Shula put the ring on her right ring finger. Shula switched languages. Celia understood her absolutely seamlessly. It was bewildering, everything was bewildering.

"The neckline on *that* one won't do with the bra you've got on, if you pick it I've got a different one to go with, this sort of thing is why I wanted to measure you myself when you were looking at dresses for your cousin's wedding, remember - you'll probably want one of the ones from here anyway, you've been on a budget -"

Eventually Celia picked the sleeveless cornflower-blue thing with the tiers of petal skirt. She let Shula flutter around her putting her in ridiculously nice underthings - they'd changed in front of each other before, going swimming, in gym class.

It didn't occur to her to wonder until after Shula was zipping up the back of the dress and kissing her neck to wonder whether the ridiculous niceness of the underthings was supposed to be *relevant*, later. It was an engagement party, not a wedding, but - Shula probably had waited until Celia was eighteen for *some* reason. Was she expecting...?

Probably not. Probably it was just part of the princessly upscaleness of the entire ensemble. The dress went with ankle boots in the same color. Celia put those on herself; Shula was shucking her own clothes and pulling a dress of her own from the depths of the wardrobe, screamingly scarlet lace and backless.

"Pearls or diamonds?" Shula asked, smirking, snapping Celia out of staring dry-mouthed at the way Shula's hair spilled between her shoulderblades and flame-red tatting.

"Uh?" If *Celia* wanted to make the niceness of anybody's underthings relevant, later, Shula would *probably* be amenable, they'd talked in embarrassed fits and starts and surreptitiously swapped pointers to library books because high school health class told them *nothing*. *Amenable* might be an understatement and this was *Shula's own* palace-estate-thing so there was no supervision that couldn't be shooed, probably -

"Your earrings won't match your dress," Shula explained. "I have pearls and diamonds in that color, which do you prefer? You could maybe pull off turquoise but it's not a perfect match, I'd want to add a scarf... amethyst for contrast?"

"...Pearls. The rings don't match either, though."

"Gold and ruby are sort of culturally neutral. Like wearing glasses on Earth, you know? But there's time to change dresses if you only just wondered about that?"

"Oh. No, it's fine. Pearls."

On went pearls. Earrings, a hair ornament she didn't have a word for, and one strand of teardrops around the neck. Shula herself went with gemless gold - lots of it. She looked like some kind of fire goddess and Celia wanted to kiss her. So she did.

Panicking and fainting and worrying she was having her first psychotic break could wait.

David went very docilely with the thing that looked like Maureen. He called it "Maureen", and got in the car with it, and let it drive him to a parking garage in a random part of town, and pretended not to notice that it was doing magic when the lights flickered off in the elevator and they traveled to another planet.

They thought he was crazy, and he was, in fact, absolutely, *also*, crazy, but he'd taken his meds and he was trying his absolute hardest to separate fiction from fact from fortune-telling, because they had his *kid*.

David followed the thing out of the little room that was pretending to be the elevator on the other end. He didn't remark on the fire-based lighting or the smell of the air. He followed the thing and let it loan him a suit. He put on the suit. He followed the thing some more.

"You may have noticed it's not an ordinary party," said the thing.

They thought he was crazier than he was. "Huh?" he blinked. Let the thing think he walked around thinking that everywhere looked like a Hell-themed amusement park every day of his life. Or let it think he thought this was a hotel ballroom, whatever.

"...Never mind. Just remember that this is very important to Celia, all right? Be happy for her."

He nodded. He attempted to paste on a smile. Oh, this was fantastic time for an icepick of a headache.

The thing that looked like Maureen led him into a huge hall.

David started looking for his daughter.

Fire danced in bowls of colored glass marbles and burned in ropes that reached from arch to arch under the high ceiling. Fire twisted in alcoves along every wall and smoldered under glass panels in the floor. It was sun-bright, windowless, artfully designed, warm.

There were people. They were not human. While Shula was brushing out Celia's hair she'd remarked that it was very *fashionable* for non-royal plakti to look mostly human, but gauche verging on illegal for them to complete the illusion without strict orders to go

undercover. Many of them just had completely black eyes and could otherwise have passed for ordinary in any city on Earth, but Celia saw green skin, fox tails, bat wings, antlers, elf ears.

There were also some who bore no marks at all.

Celia and Shula paused at the top of the stairs, and Shula pointed out her brothers and sisters. "Not that I expect you to remember all their names today." They would be easy to forget, too, all monosyllables, introduced rapid-fire. And their mother and father: "King Juan Luis, Queen Elena. Fall back on 'your majesty' if you forget." And aunts and uncles with one or two or three or more "greats", who had never gone to Earth and so had kept their rings; these she did not trouble to name.

"You don't have to talk much if you're nervous," Shula reminded her, "you don't have to go away from me, it'll be all right." And they descended the stairs.

"Will they be expecting me to be a girl," Celia murmured. It wasn't quite a question.

"Mother and Father know. My personal servants know. Everyone else might be surprised. I can do the talking."

"...Okay."

"I hope you don't mind but I invited your parents. They should be around here somewhere."

"... *What* ? They're here? They can't - they don't -" What they couldn't or didn't Celia wasn't sure.

"It's your engagement party and they're your parents, I knew you wouldn't want them to miss it. If your dad reacts badly to your being gay you'll be completely safe here, we'll protect you - and besides,

you have somewhere else besides his place to go, now, what's mine is yours," soothed Shula.

That didn't stop Celia's heart from trying to escape her ribcage when they set foot on the floor of the hall and one of the siblings glided up to them.

"Hello again, Kess!" he said to Shula. The ring didn't translate "kess" for Celia; she couldn't tell why. "This is... irregular."

"It's *Shula* ," said Shula with a smile full of teeth.

"Is that her name?"

" *Mine* . I spent long enough earning it. *She* ," and Shula put a protective arm over Celia's shoulders, "is Celia. My fiancée. Celia, this one is my brother Meer. Oldest after me."

"...Hi," squeaked Celia. She was talking to a prince. She'd been talking to a princess every day for a rather long time, but that was Shula, she *knew* Shula, and she did not know Shula's little brother Meer.

"Hello," said Meer, and he collected Celia's hand to go for the knuckle-kiss, but when Celia flinched Shula practically *hissed* and he transitioned into a handshake. "Are you quite all right?" he asked.

Celia was not quite all right but if she didn't act quite all right she'd start a war and disappoint Shula and "I'm fine."

"Is that so?" Meer wondered.

"She said she's fine, Meer," said Shula. "How have you been? I've had only intermittent reports through Lyne."

"Oh, it's been as always."

"Lyne?" asked Celia.

"One of my servants. She looked out for me in the early years when I was on Earth, posed as the nanny for me and Amrika and relayed messages as necessary until I could get away with wearing all my rings all the time," Shula said, stroking Celia's arm.

"But not very frequent messages," murmured Meer. "We hadn't, for example, heard of your affection for sterile relationships."

"Do you think I can't figure it out, or do you *hope* I can't?" asked Shula. "Eighteen years on Earth didn't unteach me to change shape." She bared her teeth at him and for just a moment they were sharp, gleaming fangs.

"Wishful thinking. You'll introduce delay, perhaps irrecoverable amounts of it - and cause unrest -"

"No one's going to find that their most urgent task is fomenting unrest about my engagement's gamete quota unless someone *tells* them so, Meer," said Shula.

"You might be surprised. You've been away."

"I trust Lyne's reports."

"Lyne's focus has always been on you, not on the broader situation."

"Perhaps I should talk to Mother and Father, who Lyne has *also* been known to focus on now and again," said Shula with a smile made of ice. "Excuse us."

Celia was ushered along by the arm over her shoulders; she looked back at Meer, who had procured a glass of something from somewhere and lifted it in a sort of toast. Celia shuddered and faced front as Shula drew her towards the king and queen.

They weren't wearing crowns, just rich elaborate outfits and perfectly human shapes. They looked like they might be sixty, but

not older; the king appeared classically Spanish, his bride nut-brown with vaguely unplaceable features that made sense for someone who'd been born hundreds of years ago to a tribe since gone extinct. Celia could see the resemblance to her girlfriend. Fiancée. Shula hadn't told her to bow or curtsy and the arm over her shoulder wasn't cuing her to do so now, so Celia just smiled tentatively.

"You must be Celia," said the king.

"Yes your majesty."

"And K- excuse me, Shula - Shula convinced you to marry her without attempting to tempt you with the princess bit, the magic, the chance to explore another planet...?"

I'd so much rather Shula didn't come with those things Celia didn't say. She smiled a little wider, hoped she didn't look manic, and held up the hand with the immortality ring. This must have been the right thing to do because Shula kissed her temple, squeezed her shoulder.

"Mm-hm. And the part about heirs...?"

What an intrusive question. Celia hadn't even *begun* to really think about raising magic alien royalty on a starless planet and then cuckooing them to somebody else's family until they brought home somebody just like her. "Shula said she could figure that part out!" she said, too high, too strained.

"So you're not, ah, *exclusively* partial to girls?"

Oh god Celia didn't want this man for a father-in-law she'd been expecting Shula to come out to predictably upset Muslims and cut them off good riddance not a damned royal space conquistador - "Ah, well -"

"It's a small price to pay," Shula said. "But Father, Mother, it's so good to see you both in person again, it's been too long." She let

Celia go long enough to hug each of her parents.

"I see my dad," Celia breathed.

"Oh - okay, go say hi," said Shula. "Come right back after, I don't want you getting lost, sweetie."

Celia nodded automatically and made for her dad as quickly as her dress and the crowd permitted.

David turned out to be standing near Maureen, who collected Celia into a hug. "Celia! Oh, you must be so excited," she said.

Celia hugged back without thinking about it. "I'm - it's a lot to take in - did somebody tell you -?"

"I've been filled in. I was skeptical, but, well." Maureen gestured around them.

"Are you doing okay, Dad?" Celia asked David, who hadn't spoken.

He opened his mouth, closed it, repeated, swallowed. "I'm fine," he eventually said. "You never mentioned you were..."

Celia set her jaw. Not *even* traveling to another planet would make her life less perpetually about - "Well, I am."

"I wish you'd said," said David, looking with vague distress at the various nonhuman people milling around and availing themselves of hors d'oeuvres.

"Well. Now you know."

"...I need to lie down," David said abruptly. "Celia, you, you probably know the place, obviously Maureen just got here and," he ran his hand through his thinning hair, took a deep breath, "but you can probably show me somewhere I can lie down, awful headache -"

"Oh - sure - we passed some empty rooms on our way," blinked Celia. "Uh, what's hers is mine, I'm sure you can -"

"I," began Maureen.

"Hm?" said Celia.

"Never mind."

"This way, Dad, up the stairs."

Shula caught her eye but Celia gestured with mild daughterly exasperation at her dad, he of the perpetual headache, and Shula nodded. Down the corridor they went. Celia found a room with no people and some furniture that looked comfy enough and led David in.

He didn't lie down. He shut the door behind them.

"Celia," he said. "How much do you know?"

She was squinting at him, confused. "Know?"

"You know there are aliens, you were just in a roomful of them -"

"I - yeah, Shula's caught me up on, on basically everything -"

"Not everything."

"She's been in kind of a hurry, if she forgot some -"

"That wasn't Maureen."

There was a silence. He could feel the skepticism radiating off her, not in the way he just knew things but in the way that he knew his child.

"What?" Celia finally asked.

"It hasn't been Maureen for months. Joe didn't believe me. I didn't know how to tell you, I didn't know how I knew, it's not Maureen, it's one of the things."

Silence.

"I know - stuff. It's not like the, the things I think I know, it's not the psychosis, I can tell them apart. At least I can now." He was tripping over his tongue, talking with his hands; he started to pace. "I could tell it wasn't her. Not her on the phone, not since a little before you moved in with me. I could tell your friend was an alien but I thought I was *wrong* because an alien would only have a family to pretend to be human long enough to find a *mate* and I didn't *know* and you could have told me -"

"Dad, you're -"

"I'm not - I *am* crazy. I'm not trying to say I'm all there - but I knew it wasn't Maureen, I knew why Shula was on Earth even if I dismissed it, *you've seen now* . The CIA isn't after me but I *was* abducted by aliens *and so were you* . Celia, listen to me."

"She wants to marry me," Celia breathed. "And - and if I don't then her little brothers and sisters - they'll start a *war* -"

"Celia," murmured David. "Kiddo. Do *you* want to marry *her* ?"

"I. I, um."

"If she staked her planet's peace on marrying you - if she really did that, if she's not lying - Celia, that isn't your fault."

"I don't *want* to start a war."

"She took your mom. She took your mom and replaced her with an alien and didn't tell you. I don't know how I know things -"

"Earth's starting to get magic," murmured Celia.

"Shula told me," Celia said rapidly, starting to pace, "told me that after a planet has life long enough -"

"She's going to wonder what's keeping you any minute," said David. "I'll see if I can - know anything useful - see if I can direct it - find me later, make sure it's me."

Celia swallowed and hugged him and then swirled out of the room and left him behind. She pressed herself to the wall of the hallway, breathing hard.

She took my mom.

He's literally, textbook, psychotic, and he's the only evidence I have. It's Shula, for crying out loud, she wouldn't -

Mom was going to take me away to Montana where I would have been very hard to propose to and I bet Shula had all kinds of rules for how she had to handle her own foster family but none about mine.

I saw Mom. I've been talking to her.

SHAPESHIFTING ALIENS. Some of whom are Shula's servants. She -

She's

Shula

-

Mine. Promise.

MAGIC SPACE WAR.

Celia scrunched her eyes shut and inhaled deeply. It smelled like fire. Extraterrestrial minerals and foreign perfumes and fire.

She walked step by shaky step back to the party, steadying herself on the wall.

She thought she caught a glimpse of Shula standing near Maureen - if it was Maureen - when she turned the corner, but then there was a flurry of movement between them and Celia; when she caught sight of Shula again she was near one of the other princesses, unless Celia had misremembered whether the dramatic hat with the feathers was a sister or a cousin or what. Celia trotted down the stairs to her girlfriend. Fiancée. Girlfriend. Kidnapper. Fiancée. ...She trotted down the stairs towards Shula.

"Is your dad all right?" Shula asked.

"He just needed to lie down. I put him in an empty room. I can do that, right?"

"Of course you can. This is my sister Rai, second-youngest -"

Celia let Shula shuffle her around from small-talk to small-talk. Celia did not remember any of the siblings' names except for Meer, who'd made an impression; no one else traded barbs with Shula like that. Celia didn't try to talk to Maureen again and Maureen didn't try to talk to her. Which was its own kind of evidence.

The party went on, and on. There were no clocks; Celia had been relieved of her phone when she'd changed into the dress. She ate little snacks that indistinguishably-shaped servants offered on trays. She danced with Shula. She mixed up royalty and dubiously-noble offshoots. She stammered through a compliment on someone's curling antelope horns. She peeled off from Shula a couple of times to wade through the crowd herself, for clarity, for quelling distance

between herself and Shula's backless dress (why did it have to be a backless dress) but came to no conclusions, always drifted back to Shula's side.

The crowd thinned out, slowly; then the king and queen left, and the population of the ballroom dropped dramatically. "I can send someone to bring your dad home," Shula said.

"Can - can he stay overnight? Or what passes for overnight. I don't think changing planets agreed with him and he could use a little longer."

"All right," shrugged Shula. "Your uncle won't freak out?"

"Dad goes out by himself sometimes and he's had a good few weeks. He can tell uncle Joe that he was staying with one of his friends. He has friends."

"If you say so," said Shula. "It's not like I don't have room. Your mom's going back, though, do you want to say goodbye?"

Celia swallowed. "We can always visit later, right?"

"Sure, sweetie."

"I bet she's tired. It's later in Montana."

"Sure. Straight home with her, then. Cait, take care of that, please," Shula said to a passing servant.

"Yes Princess."

Shula turned back to Celia. "One of my brothers is staying for a while too. Meer. I don't really have a good excuse to get rid of him, but if he bothers you or anything any servant will back you up, all right? They all know who you are now."

Celia nodded.

"Are you okay?" Shula asked her, pursing her lips in concern.

"I'm just a - a little overwhelmed."

"The party's over," soothed Shula, petting Celia's hair. "You can change back into your regular clothes if you want. Or another set, I have some normal things around. Pajamas, if you're sleepy. Oh, and Cait found you a ring for Spanish, so you won't be left out of royal family conversations if we lapse into it. It's with your clothes."

"I - yeah." Celia wanted her phone back, if only to be able to check the time. "Yes please."

"Can you find your own way? I need to arrange some things with some servants. I've been gone such a long time."

"I think I remember how to get there."

"Good. I've left the firelight going in all the hallways in the house since you can't operate it yourself. Just holler if you need any of it turned on or off." And then she pulled Celia into a snug embrace. "You did beautifully. I know it's all a bit much but you're doing great. Just hang in there, all right, sweetie? I love you so much."

"Love you," Celia echoed, because she did, she *did* -

Shula kissed her. She *dipped* her, right there in the middle of the deserted ballroom, and kissed Celia till she was breathless and melting and why did the dress have to be *backless* -

"I'll come find you when I'm free," Shula purred, voice full of promises.

Celia was practically hypnotized until Shula straightened her up again and pressed another kiss to her forehead and swept out of the room.

Celia stood in place.

And then she climbed the stairs and wound her way through the halls until she'd found the wardrobe again.

She came out of the room in a set of pajamas which she'd found in the wardrobe. Her phone was in her pocket, the Spanish ring had joined the one for immortality and the one for plakti language, she had her own shoes on again because walking on these stone floors barefoot sounded uncomfortable. And there was Meer, waiting for her. Celia stopped cold when she saw him. "Um."

"Hello again," Meer said. "Is it just me or do you seem less than comfortable?"

"Were you lurking out here the entire time I was *changing*?"

"Please," snorted Meer. "Don't ascribe me such motives. If I want to be around naked women I have better ways to do it."

"W-would Shula want you to be talking to me?" asked Celia, trying to sound more indignant than mousy, quite sure she was failing.

"No," said Meer, "probably not."

"Well. This. Is her estate," said Celia.

"The question is do *you* want me to be talking to you, and that depends very significantly on whether you want to be here. In my dear sister's estate," said Meer.

Celia couldn't think of anything intelligent to say, so she just stared at him coldly. He looked like some kind of Disney prince. One who was about to have a character arc that wiped the smirk off his face. Or turn out to be a bad guy all along.

"Did Shula tell you that you *have* to be here?" he inquired. "Did she spin nasty stories about how warlike her family is? Am I the villain of the piece? She's never liked me."

Celia didn't like him either. "She - wants an orderly succession."

"Celia," said Meer in a low voice. "If that was what she most wanted, she would have found a *boyfriend* ."

"She - she's a lesbian."

"That wouldn't stop her if her priority was getting married and popping out heirs in a perfectly regular manner without letting me - or our other siblings - get within arm's reach of the throne. Would it? Marriages of convenience are known on Earth, I believe."

"She wants to marry *me* ."

"I don't doubt *that* for an instant. She wants *very* badly to marry you, and she's gambling everything on her ability to pull it off. *Including* the orderliness of the succession. Which she could *easily* secure even without having had to locate a boyfriend by yielding with as much grace as she could muster to *me* . Now, I confess my experience with humans is limited to immediate family members very far from your own culture. But however fond you were of Shula last week, you do not seem to me to be entirely at your ease here."

"It's a lot to get used to," Celia said softly.

"You don't look enraptured and curious, you look like you want to crawl in a hole and forget this ever happened," said Meer.

"And, what, you want to offer your shoulder to cry on?" Celia snapped, suddenly angry. He'd noticed and this was what he was doing about it? Loitering while she changed clothes and asking her pointed questions about how comfortable she was. That was sure to improve things.

"I'd rather not," said Meer. "I'd rather just solve the problem. The political situation is neither as stable *nor* as unstable as Shula may have led you to believe. The population might be able to cope with you, *if* she can get you pregnant. How quickly do you want her to feel obliged to try?"

Celia swallowed.

"Not soon, I'll wager, and every year that goes by is more time for our parents to spend getting older a little at a time. And more time for Earth to become less like what we've grown up expecting. It was a trick indeed to slip Shula into a family. How much harder is it eighteen years along? If I tried and failed to find a queen, two more decades might make it near impossible for Tam to give it a try, at least in any remotely pleasant part of the world. We can only do so much to computer records and cameras."

"Shula found me, though. You - you don't have to try." *You don't have to do this to some other girl.*

"I do if her little shapeshifting idea doesn't work. Or if you're sterile. I do if, for whatever reason, *you don't want to be here* . If you don't want to be *queen* ."

"What makes you think you'd be able to find somebody who wanted to be here? What, are you psychic?" *Shit. Don't say that again.*

Meer snorted. "Here's another question for you. Why didn't you have any inkling before you got here? Why was this a surprise?"

"...Shula said there were rules. Protocols. That she had to observe. She wasn't supposed to tell me, it would be against the - the rules."

"That's absolutely correct. Would you care to guess how those are enforced?"

Was someone listening in - No. Shula had never acted like she was being watched. Shula had made reports which contained whatever she felt like putting in them, she'd had a servant-nanny only as a child - she was not *bugged* while she was kissing Celia in her bedroom or knocking their shoes together under the cafeteria table.

"They're *not* enforced," said Meer. "Does that allay your concerns?"

"What do you *want*?" asked Celia.

"An orderly succession," Meer said. "One more, and then over for good. I will go, I will find a queen who will be less..." He gestured at Celia vaguely in lieu of a description. "And we will each have our own rings."

"Nobody's allowed to be king forever."

"The current model cannot sustain itself," hissed Meer. "Imagine! Imagine trying to insert *your* children into an Earth that has had another five or six hundred years to advance! To imagine life on other planets - and learn to keep more careful documentation of the life on its own! To perhaps develop magic, which it may begin doing at any time!"

Celia flinched.

Meer just took it as an excuse to go on, though: "I remember Mother sobbing for weeks when her little Kess was turned into someone *else's* baby on the eve of her adulthood. I can't say I look forward to putting her through similar again, but at least on my plan this would be the *last* time. Is that what you want, even generously assuming it will continue to work? For your children? And grandchildren? Shula could have ended it, but she has walked the knife edge of tradition just enough to get you exactly where she wants you. I am the only realistic ally you have in getting you where you would be much better off. Home."

She took your mom.

Meer hadn't said anything about that, but this was two sources now - Meer had no reason to love Celia. David had no reason to hate Shula. Did that add up to trustworthiness?

Her dad was crazy and Shula's brother wanted to be king -

"What do you want?" Celia asked again.

"Your ring," Meer said. "I'll give you a dummy to replace it. When Shula takes it back for her own turn she'll notice the difference and then she'll have to admit defeat - she can't have you visibly aging at human rate in front of people, even if she can cover for herself in the short term with shapeshifting."

"She'd know it was you. She knows you hate her."

"And if she confronts me about it she'll have to admit that you gave it to me, and she will be out of the running for taking an unwilling Earthling regardless. I run a certain risk here if you change your mind and then blatantly lie, of course. I know very little about your personal integrity, having only what my sister gave me to work with." He gave her an assessing look, seeming to settle on *it'll do*. Celia wanted to slap him.

"I love her," Celia breathed. "I don't want her to die."

"She will be looking for you any moment," Meer said, clenching his fists. Rings glinted around his fingers. "Make a decision."

"I need to *think*."

Footsteps. "Celia?" called Shula's voice.

Meer, scowling, disappeared down the hallway without another word.

Celia tripped on her way around the corner to meet Shula. Shula caught her. "Are you all right, sweetie?"

"I'm fine." *I'm not fine. I'm not fine. I'm not fine.* "I want to sleep. I'm exhausted."

"Okay," said Shula, stroking her fingers through Celia's hair. "Okay. Let's get you somewhere cozy and put you to bed. It's been such a long day."

Maureen woke up in her own bed.

This was the Montana house. She didn't remember -

"You've been very sick for months and let Celia live with her father. Celia will be fine," said a voice in her ear. "But now you're better and you're going to go in to work..."

Maureen blinked as the voice went on murmuring. That would explain -

Maureen woke up in her own bed. This was the Montana house. She didn't -

"You've been very sick. But now -"

Maureen woke -

"You've -"

Maureen woke up in her own bed, in her own home. She felt a lot better. God, the entire summer was a fog. A blank, really. Didn't help that she'd had that nasty insurance fumble with the new job, but now she was all right. She called the new boss. Well, new. She'd technically had the position for months now. But she hadn't gone in. They were very understanding, glad that she'd finally be in.

The house was disorganized, or rather organized badly. She'd want to rearrange everything. Maybe she'd been on drugs when she'd unpacked. Painkillers or drowsy cold pills or something. Whatever. She found something business-casual, she got in the car, she drove to the office with GPS assistance.

She called Celia during her lunch hour.

Voicemail. She left a brief message and went back to what she was doing. Celia would be fine. She felt very confident that Celia would be fine. She was eighteen now, wasn't she? And she'd eloped with her girlfriend, who was going to take good care of her. Maureen stayed late; she had a lot of work to catch up on.

"Dad."

David's head hurt. He was so tired. He'd swallowed the emergency day's worth of meds out of his wallet, dry, and they were a lump in his throat even after an hour's sleep. "Wuh."

"Dad, wake up. I don't know if I'll be able to keep them from bringing you home after everybody's up in the - nonmorning. Dad."

He rubbed his eye and looked blearily at Celia. "What - d'you need?"

"Did you think of anything else to tell me?"

"No," he apologized wretchedly. "Don't, don't know how to steer."

"Can you tell me if I can trust Shula's brother Meer?"

"Who?"

"Shula has brothers and sisters. One of them is named Meer. He had a - he had an idea but I don't know -"

David wrenched his attention into line. Shula had brothers and sisters, that fit. Meer. Meer was -

"Didn't lie to you," he said. Pulled from nowhere. Knew.

"He didn't?"

"He didn't," agreed David. "All true. But I don't know if he - wants good things? For you?"

"I don't know either. But it - it helps. Anything else?"

David *thought* -

"Maureen's home again."

Celia exhaled. "Oh good. She's safe?"

"Biologically."

"...Huh?"

"I don't know," said David. "She's - she's biologically safe, that's what I have."

"...Okay. Is there anything else?"

Think. Think. Any shred of anything could be the difference -

His head felt like it was going to burst open. His eyelids were so heavy.

"I don't have anything else," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Celia said softly back. "Go back to sleep. Love you, Dad."

"Love you too," he croaked, and he fell back onto the soft thing he was sleeping on.

Celia slipped out of the room.

Before David fell back asleep he knew she was going to slide under a blanket beside Shula. He knew no details, but that one was chilling enough. He shivered, just a little, in spite of the warmth of the room.

In the morning an alien thing came to bring him home and he did not know if he had done enough. He couldn't steer. He didn't know.

Shula's favorite servants, black-eyed, one shaped like a man and one like a woman, served breakfast in the morning. Celia thanked them hoarsely and ate. It was oatmeal and Canadian bacon and fruit salad, fairly well-calculated comfort food for Celia's tastes. Celia allowed herself to be comforted as best she could. She wondered what plakti ate when they were alone. What would grow on a starless planet?

Shula and Meer were happy enough with the human food and the servants weren't eating with them - they'd left altogether after setting down the plates and asking if Shula needed anything else. Shula and her brother talked about family that she had not had a chance to fully catch up with at the party; they were almost cordial compared to their previous meeting. Celia was mostly quiet, but she leaned in to Shula's hand when Shula touched her shoulder or petted her hair.

It felt good and she loved her and why couldn't that be it, why couldn't they be shopping for new notebooks and pencils for senior year and kicking each other's shoes in the aisles? Getting brunch and wishing Islam would liberalize faster. Applying to colleges. Celia wondered if any of her schools would let her take classes by correspondence from another planet.

Shula kissed her, tasting like cinnamon, and got up, probably to go to the bathroom or something, leaving Celia and Meer alone.

Meer cast a furtive look at the door. Celia shivered.

"You will not get another chance," Meer said under his breath.

Didn't lie to you.

Had Shula lied, technically, had she ever -

Celia yanked the ring off her left hand and slapped it into his waiting palm and took the identical one he gave her and put it on the same finger. Then she took a huge spoonful of oatmeal in the hopes that the not-quite-chewing demanded by the substance would cover her facial expression. The ring had disappeared by some sleight of hand. Or real magic. Celia was suddenly aware that she'd never gotten a complete list of what-all growing up on the starless planet would allow. She only *suspected* that the fire was part of the package.

Shula returned a leisurely few minutes later and reassumed her seat at the head of the table (Celia at her right, Meer at her left). The rest of breakfast elapsed. The servants came back to clear away the plates. Shula started talking about how she wanted Celia to see all the best parts of the starless planet, there were museums and shows and architectural marvels -

"Oh, sweetie," said Shula. "Can I have a turn with the ring? Once a day is the best schedule for switching."

She was going to take it *right now*? Celia had thought it might be weeks, months even, she could have had time to come up with a story - Meer hadn't warned her -

Celia offered Shula her hand.

Shula took the ring. "It doesn't matter which finger you have these on," she remarked, "if it ever bothers you not to have an engagement ring you can use one that we aren't swapping back and forth all the time."

Shula put the ring on.

Meer was making an obviously heroic effort not to vibrate out of his chair. He'd said Shula would notice. How long would it take? Was he going to stay at her estate until she did?

Shula poured herself a glass of the water that was still on the table. It had cucumber slices in it. She sipped.

Was she not *going* to notice? Meer couldn't very well announce to everyone that he'd -

That Celia had -

Celia poured herself some water too and gulped it.

"Meer," said Shula.

"...Mm?" he replied.

"I know we've never really gotten along, but this takes it too far."

"Pardon?"

Shula's eyes snapped up from her glass to her brother's face. "I don't know what's worse. That you wanted me to die, or that you thought I'd roll over and do it just like that."

Meer dropped the pretense. "I'd like to see you try to get it back now. I have it secreted away in layers of -"

"I don't care if you flung it into the black hole," said Shula sweetly. "Spanish rings are cheap. Someone will happily learn the language and package up everything they've acquired into a new one for Celia if she'd care to pick it up."

" *Spanish* rings -"

"I'm not stupid, Meer. Why would you still be here? Why would you loiter at *my* estate? Brotherly affection? I swapped the rings around on her fingers in her sleep. Celia's still wearing it. Touch her and I'll *blank* you."

"You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?" snapped Shula. "You just tried to kill us both! Slowly, sure, but don't pretend you had plans to spend the first two immortalities you managed to buy on me and her once you were *king*. You tried to murder me, and worse, you would have gotten Celia too. Celia can't even shapeshift and you were going to make her grow *old* inside of a century!"

"They'll never believe -"

"You didn't even notice that Lyne isn't wearing the other end of my chat ring anymore. I gave it to Mother and told her I was concerned," said Shula. "Mother's been listening to this entire conversation. Perhaps she has Father with her, too. Or any of our little brothers and sisters who'll be fascinated to know what you think of the ties that bind."

Meer twitched.

"Get out of that chair and I will *destroy* you," Shula hissed.

"Shula," whispered Celia.

"This is not the time," Shula said in a voice that brooked no argument. "We *will* talk later. So what's your move, Meer?"

Meer sat very still. Shula waited.

"I surrender," Meer said softly.

"Lyne. Cait. Escort my brother to our parents to see what they'll make of him," Shula said. Her servants drifted into the room on cue. Lyne turned his chair around; then each one took one of his elbows and marched him away.

"Shula," Celia tried to say. Nothing came out.

Slowly, Shula turned in her chair towards her. She adjusted a ring on her finger.

"I don't know what he told you," Shula said. "I'm hoping that he just conditioned you with a few layers of memory wipes and assertions. I'm not sure when he would have had time. But I'm hoping, as awful as it would be for that to have happened in my own home. Because Celia, I don't know what I'd do if you, you of all people, were *intentionally* colluding with *Meer* to get me *killed*. I don't have the words. It wasn't like that, was it, Celia?"

Celia's blood was ice and she didn't seem to be able to blink, to look away from that hurt, uncertain look in Shula's eyes. *I tried to kill her. Shula no I didn't mean. Oh God I literally tried to kill her. Oh God I'm horrible.*

"Are you missing any time, sweetie?" Shula asked softly. "It hadn't come up before but plakti magic can erase memories, if you're close enough, and if you're not using the same magic defensively - which you can't. I wouldn't have let him near you, not ever, you're safe with me."

"I," said Celia.

"You must be so confused. It can do that if it's handled badly and I wouldn't expect him to be a virtuoso... I'm so sorry I wasn't there to fend him off. You look dizzy. Do you want to go lie down?"

"Yes," said Celia fervently, "please."

And they went back to bed, and snuggled up together on top of the covers, and Celia tried to breathe.

She'd never forgive me she shouldn't forgive me oh God oh God she can't even dump me she's staked everything on me she's stuck with me forever

"Oh sweetie," sighed Shula. "You're shaking."

"Sorry. Sorry I just. I don't know."

"We can put off the grand tour of the planet, if you like."

"Yes please."

"All right. Do let me know when you feel ready. There are so many things I want to show you. Nobody I'd rather show them to. My Celia."

She can erase memories too. Tell her to back up a day, two, forget all about -

No, then she'd know. She'd know I did it on purpose. She can't even dump me.

I just have to make it up to her on my own that's all what does she need a queen okay I can do that if I have to -

The alien thing didn't bother erasing David's memory.

What was he going to do, tell someone?

He told Joe he'd been over at a friend's. Joe didn't check.

And then David sat at his kitchen table with a bowl of cereal and tried to steer.

"Mother and Father have shut Meer up somewhere quite inaccessible. You don't have to worry about him any more," Shula said, at dinner.

"Oh. Good."

"I gave a ballpark estimate of the wedding date in five years. It's a long engagement but royal weddings take such a long time to plan and I thought you might like the option to go to college first. You can, you know. We can move in together easy as pie now we're both legally eighteen - I have loads of money even apart from Mom and Dad if they blow their tops, there's been plakti on Earth collecting local currency for ages. You won't have to sleep on your dad's couch."

"That sounds great. Thank you."

"You can ask Lyne and Cait for whatever you like for dinner, I'm going to be at Mother and Father's. Although you could come with me, if you're feeling up to it?"

"Of course I'll come with you."

Shula smiled. She leaned over the table for a kiss. Celia kissed her back, of course, of course. "I love you," Shula murmured.

"I love you too," Celia said.

"Do you want to wear white?" asked Shula.

"I don't know, are you planning to marry a virgin?" Celia asked.

Shula laughed. "It hasn't really meant that even on Earth for years. But to answer your question - it wouldn't be my first choice."

"Yes to white," says Celia. "Yes to whatever you want, I'm sure you've been thinking about the wedding longer than I have."

"You've got that right," laughed Shula. "C'mere." And she kissed her again.

Celia kissed her back.

Changeling

This story is set in the same universe as [Visitor](#) and [Queen](#).

This story is also available in audio, which you may find on [this episode of Wingardcast](#).

The last mortal wore out and Grandmama wanted a new one, so they sent Bree.

Well, first they named her Eliliand, but that was early and forgotten enough that nobody knew that name apart from Grandmama herself and Eliliand's father. And the mortal they took was once named Bree but they called her Trinket, and in Trinket's place *because fair's fair* Grandmama sent - well. Bree.

Bree the fairy cried a lot. She did not like her wings being tucked away with the magic of *fair's fair*. She did not like drinking milk, nor how hungry she got when she wouldn't swallow it. She did not like it when Trinket's human parents picked her up and rocked her and she didn't like it when they left her alone and she didn't like it when they acted like she couldn't understand every word they spoke. Bree was young but she wasn't *brand new* or *stupid*, she knew everything they said, she could read. (But she couldn't talk, or write, not until a mortal the age she was pretending could. *Fair's fair.*)

Bree *was* young enough to forget, though, exactly why all these things were the case. Exactly why they were so upsetting.

By the time *fair's fair* allowed her to talk, she had nothing to say on the subject. She was uncomfortable all the time and hated meat and dairy and didn't want to be hugged and she was whip-smart with a book - but she was called Bree and three years old and human,

probably, right, that would be the obvious thing for her to be, look at her human parents right there.

This was why they had to send a very young fairy. If a grownup fairy were changed to look like a baby mortal, then they would inevitably act *very* inhuman - and then fair would not be fair.

And fair *was* fair.

Bree was a very obedient child. She did not whine about how her back hurt, after they brought her to a doctor and the doctor said nothing was wrong and Mum said *stop complaining* . She did not turn up her nose at cheese and eggs and sausage after she turned up negative for allergies and Dad said *clean your plate* . She was not allowed to ask for a new bicycle again or neglect writing her uncle a thank-you note or eat her entire dark chocolate Easter bilby at once or stay up past nine or talk back to Mum or interrupt Dad or let her shoelaces stay untied or or or -

It did not occur to her that it might be odd to have no choice in these matters until she had already been attending school for several years. Of course her friends said that their mums did not let them do things, and then often tended not to do them. And Bree did not have to do what her teachers said, except for Miss Hope with the tin of lollies (and everybody *liked* Miss Hope, largely on account of the tin of lollies, so it was not unusual to be cooperative with her).

But when Bree was eight one of her friends (Bree socialized with other well-behaved children, both because they formed a natural clique and because her dad encouraged it) did not do her homework. And Bree had *heard* her mum tell her to do it.

Bree did not bring this up with her friend. But she thought about it.

As a general rule Bree herself did not tell people to do things. Her dad had told her not to be bossy, once, when she was four.

But Bree had also been told, since then, *Say please* . And she found this gave her a bit of leeway.

She experimented.

" *Please* let me go to the movies."

" *Please* buy me that dress."

" *Please* don't make me go to school today."

And her mum or dad (who were named, respectively, Anne and Sam Taylor, which information Bree had memorized in case she became lost) would absently give her leave to go, put the dress in the cart, call in sick for her.

Bree didn't know why she could do this, but she did have the feeling that she oughtn't push it. Her mum and dad (and her grade two teacher with the lollipops and the one friend she had a habit of swapping lunches with) could do it right back, so she didn't think she had best bring it to mind, or it would all be very *Ella Enchanted* until she found a prince and Bree did not think princes were in stock at the boyfriend store.

When she was fourteen she did entertain thoughts of going to Canberra and whispering instructions to politicians, but if one did *that* it probably led to sinister gentlemen in suits carrying one away for sinister experimentation.

Being fourteen also led her to try:

"Please come with me to the dance."

But the poor boy stammered so as he nodded and promised, and looked so upset, that she called him the next day and said that she was not going after all and he had better find someone else and

then hung up on him before she could make more of a fool of herself.

And then Bree flopped face down on her bed and cried.

She convinced her parents that she wanted to go vegan for animal rights reasons, although Bree did not actually like animals, had never liked them, they moved wrong and their eyes were wrong. Her parents let her and she ate a lot of salad and a lot of fruit and a lot of cake that foamed up with vinegar and baking soda.

Her friends thought she was strange for not liking animals. How could you not like birds. How could you not like koalas. But all Bree could think when she saw them was how uncomfortable it looked to be them, to have to move that way, to have eyes on opposite sides of your head, no hands, an unsmiling beak. To be *edible* .

She did like the more attractive categories of bugs. Butterflies, mostly. Dragonflies and ladybirds. They were too simple to be uncomfortable or afraid, she thought, and so pretty.

The more she sussed out how she was not normal the more aggressively Bree tried to do ordinary things. She went vegan but followed the herd in what music she claimed to like, which actors. She couldn't bear dogs or cats or parrots but she wore pink and painted her nails and grew her gold-blond hair into long, long waves, and people thought she was pretty, and pretty people could get away with eating salad if they gave the impression of watching their weight. She took the same second language as her friends.

She had to drop out of Mandarin. It was just - she couldn't even *begin* to explain. It just looked like English.

Well, it looked like English always did to *her* , at any rate. It was just *words* . The teacher said *hello class* and Bree said *hello* right back and the teacher said *no, no, Chinese, "hello", go on, it's not so hard*

to pronounce and then got steadily angrier until Bree fled the room to the school office and transferred into Band and learned to force sound out of the flute.

Her parents made her practice, and practice she did.

When Bree turned eighteen, her dad said, "You're a grownup now, my girl. You can do what you want."

And Bree could almost feel something go *snap* .

She did not have stand up straight she did not have to brush her teeth twice a day she did not have to wake up as soon as her alarm went off she did not have to call if she was going to be late she did not have to put half of her money in savings she did not have to wipe her feet before she came inside she did not have to hug her grandpa she did not have to say excuse me she did not have to practice music thirty minutes a day she did not have to *she did not have to she*

did

not

have

to

let

her

back

keep

aching -

Bree squeaked and bolted for the bathroom and leaned over the sink and breathed very hard.

Had she been doing that to herself, the whole time - did someone *tell her* to do some long-forgotten awful thing with her shoulders or spine, or was it psychosomatic, Bree had not previously *thought* that "thinking about a purple elephant" sorts of orders were different for her than for anyone else *but what if someone just told her that she should feel like her back hurt all the time*

Bree peeled her shirt off, unhooked her bra.

And Bree wanted to *stop doing the thing* - whatever it was.

And just like that, just like magic, she was a butterfly-girl.

She felt *entire* .

Those were *her* wings. She could fly with them if she wanted. She could be lighter, she could be smaller, she could beat those black-edged golden gaudy *wings* and rise into the air, oh, she was dreaming, she was dreaming -

The wings moved when she wanted to move them. It felt at least as natural as flicking her fingers. They'd been crumpled up, smoothed away, and no doctor had ever turned them up but there they were.

Who had told her to put them away?

She made a half-turn in front of the mirror and stepped on the piece of birch-bark paper that had fallen in a roll onto the floor when her wings had unfurled.

And she picked it up.

"Bree!" called Dad. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine!" she said, a little too high-pitched.

She stuffed the paper into her pocket.

With a deep breath, she folded her wings away, back into familiar pain, and put her top back on and left the bathroom.

But later, when she had moved into her university dorm, and had her room all to herself with a lock on the door, she took them out again.

And she read over her little roll of birchbark paper which she'd tucked into her toiletry bag.

You are a changeling.

If you have escaped your mortal captors and are ready to return home, the gate is thirteen kilometers north of the house you were left in, marked with a row of stones, and should be entered traveling due southwest. They can only keep you for as long as they can

keep

you; fair is fair.

Grandmama has a place for you in the Court.

Bree read it over, and over, and over, and she went to bed, because she'd signed up for early morning intro bio, and didn't want to be late on day one.

In uni the Mandarin teacher was a native speaker and thought Bree was a prodigy. She evaded his pleas to enroll in his classes; the other students would only hear English. Or whatever. She still didn't know exactly how that worked. Maybe this was why it had been so hard to learn to type; computers did not know what words were and could only accept letters. She still preferred to write her assignments longhand. Trying to spell with a keyboard was a nightmare.

She took intro to this and that. She read her birchbark note now and then.

Mortal captors. Fair is fair.

Grandmama.

What kind of *place* would Bree have in a *court* of butterfly-people?

She'd undone her transformation all the way, now. It was ecstatic to be so free of squeezing awful *whatever it was* ; the wings weren't the only thing. Her parents had said that her joint aches were growing pains, that she felt gross and heavy because she was bombarded by media of girls thinner than her.

When she was completely free of all her - magical whatever - Bree was only one and a quarter meters tall, spindly as any magazine cover model, winged, radiantly golden. Kind of flat-chested, but she was that even under her - shapeshifting? Illusion? She kept her fingernail polish and her hair when she changed and her clothes loosened around her, like she was physically morphing, not just shedding imaginary light. It felt real. She could reach shelves with her false height, and everything.

Her face stayed the same.

She could go back, look human, and she didn't like it, it *fucking* hurt, although she was a grownup and could do what she liked, now, so she could take paracetamol for it and nobody said *don't do that, Bree, it won't help, the doctor said it's all in your head* .

She could just sprout wings and fly and slip into Grandmama's court and there was a place waiting for her there. Supposedly.

What kind of place -? She'd grown up in the same house they would have had to deposit her in. She could find the gate. She could find out what kind of place.

But she had to look human to turn up at classes, so she did.

Bree made friends at uni, and did not take snacks from them (being vegan was an excellent excuse, although apparently Oreos were vegan, who knew; she had to say she was picky too). Bree passed her classes and learned to like cheap beer and always made the runs for it herself and was very careful to keep an eye on her drink for more than the usual reasons. Bree got a boyfriend but they broke up when she wouldn't go down on him (she didn't know what *counted*, and was willing to risk kissing but stopped there, and she could go ask *Grandmama* but *who the hell even was Grandmama*. Bree got a different boyfriend who did not have this complaint and they broke up over her emotional unavailability and she decided not to seek a new one right away. Bree majored in civil engineering because she liked cities.

Moments of privacy were so tempting.

And Bree tried, *tried*, to be careful, but she knew now how to make the hurting stop, and it was so hard to go on hurting even when she was alone, when she knew how to shrink and unfold. It was only a matter of time.

" *Oh my god* ," screamed Chloe, bedecked in fluffy bathrobe.

"Shh!" hissed Bree, slicing her wings into herself, exploding into human-gangling limbs and grabbing for her towel. "Shut up, shut up -" Just because she didn't hear the water running -

Chloe didn't shut up. Chloe wasn't her "real" name, by whatever butterfly-person reckoning considered reality; it hadn't clicked when Bree had learned it. Chloe was adopted from the Philippines. Chloe had not wanted a cookie no thank you. She didn't shut up: "What the hell, Bree!"

"Shut up shut up shut *up* !" Bree went around her and locked the door and this time made sure the handle wouldn't turn. "What did you see?"

"You. Photoshopped in real life. You *glowed* and you had *wings* and you were *tiny* -"

"Keep your voice down," Bree begged, "please."

"What are you?" asked Chloe, hushed.

" *I don't know* ."

"Are you a fairy? You looked like a fairy."

"I said I don't know. I didn't even know until a couple years ago that I was a thing."

"How is that something you *miss* ?"

Bree dropped her head into her hands. "I don't know! I don't know *anything* !"

"You know more than I do!"

Deep breaths. Deep breaths. "If I tell you what I know will you believe me that that's *all I know* ? And not call scary men in suits to cut me apart?"

"Yes," Chloe promised, sitting on the counter, elbows on knees chin on hands, *rapt* .

"I was - stuck shaped normal," Bree says, voice low. "I don't know exactly how I got stuck in the first place, but I think somebody must have told me to. People can sometimes tell me to do things and I can't not, and vice-versa, I don't *do* anything with this except get nice Christmas gifts and once I made a guy stop hitting on me at a - I don't mostly do anything with it, anyway, it's not a big deal. So

before I can remember somebody told me to be shaped human and they swapped me for - the real Bree - I was a *baby* I don't remember it I don't know what happened to her! - and I was stuck until my dad told me that I could do what I wanted and everything I'd ever been told to do went away."

"Do your parents know?" asked Chloe.

Bree shook her head. "Nobody knows. I don't even look weird to doctors. Even if they're looking. It *hurts* to be shaped like this and some of them tried to figure out what was wrong and they don't notice."

"Can you fly?"

"Probably."

"...Probably."

"How would I try it?" snapped Bree. "Where would I go? I get a lot lighter, I can flap, I could probably fly at least until I crashed into something and broke my neck, that's all I know."

"When can people tell you to do things? And the other way?"

"I'm not sure of all the rules. It seems to have to do with whether I've ever taken food from them but I don't know I haven't *done science experiments* with it. I can't tell *you* to do things, I think because you don't go by your birth name. I wouldn't have let you shout."

"How do you know you were left in place of the 'real' Bree" (Chloe made airquotes) "instead of being a mutant?"

"First time I let my wings out there was a letter folded up with them. It didn't say very much, just - that I'm a changeling and I can go back where I came from if I want. And I think I can't really be

named Bree. Or more people would be able to boss me around. But I don't know my real name, the letter didn't say."

"That's a dumb definition of *real name* ," remarked Chloe.

"I don't know how this works, okay, what am I supposed to call it, *special magic ordering people around name* ?"

"Fair," conceded Chloe. "So when you went back what was it like?"

"...I didn't go."

Chloe looked like Bree had passed up a chance to travel to the moon or something instead of thirteen kilometers north of the house she grew up in and then slightly southwest. "You haven't gone?"

"No. I don't know if I want to. I don't know what's there, I don't know what I *am* -"

"You're obviously a fairy."

"- and I don't know if I could ever come back," whispered Bree.

"Of course you could," said Chloe. "Why wouldn't you be able to come back? Why would a fairy get lost in Fairyland?"

Bree shook her head, sick with wordless forgotten fear. "I don't know."

Chloe convinced her. Chloe wanted to come along. Chloe wanted to see fairies.

Chloe said, "You know where you can fly? *Where there's fairies.* "

And Bree did sorely want to fly.

Bree had a car, and brought Chloe with her.

"Maybe you're a princess."

"Why would they give away a princess to get a mortal baby?" asked Bree.

"I don't know, but you could be. A fairy princess."

"I don't think so."

"Aren't you even a little excited?"

Bree swallowed. "Maybe the gate will be gone by now. Or there won't be anyone around, it would be all right if there were no one around. Please tell me you didn't bring a camera."

"I have my phone."

"Leave it in the car."

"Bree!"

"I don't want pictures of me flying around - with my shirt off! - plastered all over the Internet and I can't make you not put them so leave your phone in the car!"

"Fine," grumbled Chloe.

"We're bringing the compass and our lunches and that's it, we can go look around and then go straight home as soon as we see anything dangerous," said Bree firmly.

"Or what?"

"Or I don't show you where it is and we turn around and go back to school and you can tell anybody you like that I'm a fairy or a princess or the princess of fairy bread and no one will believe you."

"Ugh."

"Put your phone in the glovebox."

Chloe did. Bree drove.

They found a little park thirteen kilometers north of the Taylor residence. They found a line of stones. They identified southwest.

And they clutched each other's hands and checked for witnesses and stepped over the rocks.

It was late May winter at home, warm for the season in a way that made people mutter darkly about global warming but still sweater weather. In Fairyland it was hot sticky summer jungle. Bree had always liked warmth and rain and now she supposed she knew why. Chloe swore and started shucking layers while Bree slowly peeled off her cardigan.

The gate was marked on this side with another row of stones. Every other direction Bree could see was choked with plants. It was sufficiently dark under the thick canopy that she undid the shapeshifting on her golden glow before she had her shirt off and her wings out, just so she could see the buttons. Her skin shed enough light to see flowers sized between pinhead and hubcap, trees colonized from root to tip with enterprising mushrooms and affectionate ivy, a floor blanketed with faintly phosphorescent mosses and lichens and fallen leaves like nothing out of any field guide.

Bree shrank, and retied the drawstring on her trousers, and took a deep breath. It smelled like *green* .

"Oh god," breathed Chloe.

"Are you happy now?" Bree asked, but she didn't have much desire to hear a *yes* . There was no pain. No buzzing insects or crawling spiders. No smog, no biting cold.

I'm a fairy.

As if the wings weren't proof, but - Bree picked a curly-petaled yellow something and tucked it behind her ear and twitched her wings.

I'm really a fairy.

"Are you going to fly?" breathed Chloe.

Bree stepped out of her shoes and let her feet be tickled by moss. She looked up. Most of the really dense branches were stories up; and she was so small.

"Yeah," Bree said, and she flapped her wings and caught a branch, and then did it again, and again, until she was halfway up a huge dark-barked tree and Chloe looked like a doll.

Chloe said something, and Bree fluttered most of the way back down. "What?"

"I said I wish I could draw. *Paint*. I wish you'd let me bring my phone."

"I'm half-naked."

"You're winged and glowing. It'd be arty. I could go get my phone and only take pictures of plants?"

Bree shook her head. "I don't think you'd better."

"Do you think we'll get lost, if we go anywhere out of sight of the stones?"

"Probably. But it's so pretty right here."

"I wonder how people don't wander through all the time."

"You have to do it from the right angle. And it was a bit out of the way."

"If I got my phone, I could take pictures of landmarks and we could find our way back."

"How many times do I have to tell you no phone? You should have brought a ball of yarn if you wanted to do that."

Chloe sighed and sat down on the moss. "It's so quiet."

"I can still hear the traffic from - from Earth. Look, if you want to go on a bit without getting lost you probably can do it fine if I stay put in a high branch and keep an eye on you and the gate?"

"Thanks," said Chloe, and she started tiptoeing through the rainforest, pausing to pointedly not take pictures of every third growing thing she saw, picking a flower for her own hair when she found a scalloped purple one.

Bree sat lightly in a tree, like a soap bubble. By some instinct she kept her wings spread, flicking now and again to keep her balance. Watching, breathing.

Bree saw the other fairy first.

He was gold and he glowed.

He spotted Bree, and then he tracked her gaze straight to Chloe where she was examining a creeper.

He mouthed a word but Bree couldn't read his lips, and then he dove off of his branch towards Chloe and Bree gave chase but he was faster.

He touched the ground neatly; Bree didn't stick her landing, but in the process of failing to do that she stumbled into Chloe and got her a few ungainly meters of distance. The other fairy didn't seem to be attacking, though; he had his hand mid-gesture and seemed surprised that Bree was reacting as she was.

"H-hi?" said Chloe.

"Don't eat anything he gives you," Bree hissed in her ear.

"What? I thought that was just you," Chloe hissed back.

"I can hear you," remarked the other fairy mildly.

Bree whimpered.

"I'm not going to hurt you children," he said. "There's no reason to look so frightened."

"So we can go, then?" said Bree.

"I suppose," he said. He wasn't wearing a shirt either. Mercifully, he had on pants; they looked like they were made out of handspun cotton-or-something. "If I frighten you so much." He gave Chloe a look: *can you believe her?*

Chloe glanced between the two fairies. "He doesn't seem very scary to me."

"Don't eat anything they give you. Don't - your name is fine because - but don't tell them mine because of - the thing," said Bree.

"I already know the court mortal's name," the other fairy said. "But I'm not permitted to speak it, so it wouldn't do very well as a nickname for you. Do you have something you like better than Changeling? The last Changeling goes by Pyrite now but it took him some time to settle on it. I'm called Lamplight."

"...Changeling's fine," murmured Bree.

"I don't want to go by my name here, it gives me the creeps, now," shuddered Chloe. "Call me, I don't know, call me Seltzer, whatever."

"Now that we're all introduced," smiled Lamplight, "I suppose you can turn around if that's what you really want to do, but I'd be happy to show you to the Court."

"Come on, B- Changeling," said Chloe. "He seems perfectly nice, he's not trying to kidnap us."

Bree wavered.

Grandmama has a place for you at the -

"And then what?" Bree asked Lamplight.

"What do you mean?" he blinked innocently.

"After you show us the Court."

"I didn't have a particular agenda beyond that. There's going to be a story-reading this evening, if you find the tour inadequate hospitality." He looked so bemused and friendly.

" *Come on,* " Chloe said to Bree, and Bree realized very abruptly that if Chloe were willing to wander through Fairyland *without Bree* , she'd have done it as soon as they found the gate. Chloe would have gone back for her phone and taken pictures of everything and would perhaps even now be turning her speculative looks at Lamplight's torso into extended flirtations or something. Chloe was not doing this because she thought she needed Bree, and if Bree demanded that they leave, they'd leave, unless Lamplight had a trick up his lack of sleeve.

Bree *also* realized that if this was what it took to send her hurtling out of Fairyland, if a polite fairy boy (who hadn't asked their names or tried to give them anything to eat) offering to show her a Court she'd *known* was there was all it took to scare her away - she would not ever come back.

There was an entire fairyland and she'd seen scarcely any of it.

"Fine," escaped Bree's lips, and Lamplight gave a little bow, and led them into the jungle, away from the gate.

They were called glowgolds and there were dozens and they lived in a treehouse palace.

It was neither a cheap plywood backyard hangout nor a half-plastic safety-coded public playground. It was a *palace*. The trees themselves had been coaxed into bridges and platforms and arches and balconies where the branches formed too dense a thicket for flight. Where there was conventional construction it flowed smoothly out of that; flower-adorned thatch and wood that joined to other wood through shape alone, no nails or glue in sight.

Lamplight found a rope ladder - well, a vine ladder, many thin tendrils dried out and braided together - for Chloe.

Bree, though, could just fly straight up, and after she'd choked down her apprehension she did.

She was not out of place for not wearing a shirt, although her fleece sometime-pajama pants were not exactly the light cottony shorts that everybody else had on. She was really a bit too warm.

When she alighted on a palace outcropping a cry went up:

" *Changeling's come home!* "

She was surrounded; but when she shrank away they backed off, eyes wide. "Didn't mean to scare you." "Oh look at your hair, it's everywhere, I can braid it for you." "Welcome home!" "Aren't you hot in those? Do you want a pair of mine?" "You won't remember me; I'm Inkwel, I'm the court scribe, I wrote your note -" "Oh Changeling we wouldn't ever hurt you don't look so frightened." "You're home, you're home!"

"Why are -" Bree looked around for Chloe. Chloe was halfway up the ladder, staring openmouthed at everything; but no one was trying to sneak a slice of fruit between her lips. "Why are you all so excited to see me? Why did you give me away if you wanted me here?"

"Oh, Grandmama wanted a mortal," said, apparently, Inkwel. "Grandmama likes to have one at continental meetings, and it didn't take you so long to come back."

"I'm - I'm *twenty*."

"Twenty-three!" corrected another fairy. "You weren't *brand* new when we put you down. You had to speak enough to hear your orders."

"But that's a long time," said Bree.

"Hardly anything," scoffed a third glowgold.

"You're so *new*," a fourth cooed, reaching for Bree's hair but retracting her hand when Bree twitched.

Mortal captors. Mortals.

Oh god she was going to live forever. She was never going to look any older than these ageless lineless faces. If she ever went home she'd have to move a million times and keep changing her name and computer records just kept getting better.

Or she could stay, but she didn't want to give them ideas.

Still, her legs were pouring sweat. "I - think I will borrow a pair of shorts. If you don't mind." In moments a set were pressed into her hands. They did not seem to expect her to want privacy, and she *was* already topless; she just changed without making a big deal about it. "What are all your names -?"

"Nicknames," corrected someone.

"Sorry. Of course."

And then there followed a flurry of nicknames. Night and Grassland and Spindle and Travel and Plenty and Royal and Laughter and Woodgrain. Wisdom and Boxes and Snow and Hearth and Salt. Bree could barely remember them all. They didn't snap into slots in her mind. They weren't real. Of course.

Chloe made it up to their platform.

"Who's your mortal?" asked Boxes.

"I'm my own mortal," said Chloe.

"Seltzer," said Bree swiftly. "Don't - don't try to take her or - or anything."

"We can't do that," blinked Laughter. "That wouldn't be fair."

"...Oh."

Bree did not quite understand how that worked, what exactly was the fairness inherent in swapping babies, but they had to have had *some* reason to give her up to get the real Bree, and it might well prevent them from collecting Chloe.

...She needed to stop thinking of the real Bree as "the real Bree". This could not possibly be helpful. Bree was both real and Bree. And

the girl she had replaced was - also real, also Bree, just differently.

"You should tell us all about the mortal realm at the story-reading," said Travel.

"Yes," agreed Salt, "it wouldn't be reading but that would hardly matter, half the time it's actually only telling from memory or making things up."

"Much more interesting than listening to Aspiration again, or Invisible, let alone *Quadrant*," nodded Travel. Everyone groaned as though Quadrant's boringness were a well-worn inside joke. Bree smiled nervously.

There is a place for you -

Bree and Chloe ate their packed lunches, when they got hungry. The glowgolds were not offended.

There were so many of them. Most of them seemed interested in the returned changeling and her mortal friend, but only a fraction stopped to say hello, overwhelming though that fraction was; the others flew from place to place in the magnificent complex of treehouses on their own business. Bree saw glowgolds grooming the thatch, weeding the understory, carrying baskets and sacks and jugs, carving bits of wood, reading, writing, kissing, singing, cooking alien vegetables with flameless warmth and serving skewers of them to the other glowgolds. (The food was accepted without a fuss. She needed to learn how that actually worked instead of coasting on guesses made based on lollipops and snack-swapping.)

She didn't see any children.

But they were immortal, so for them not to have overwhelmed the whole of Fairyland, weighed the treehouses down until they collapsed into kindling, run out of nicknames - they had to have

children very seldom. One twenty-three years ago - maybe they were all set for a century.

Bree decided that she needed to figure out how they did that, when they did it - could *she* have children? Could she *not* - with mortals - even if she wanted?

It occurred to her that she'd never been sick. This had probably never risen to her parents' attention. She'd stayed home from school, complained of aching - just not because she had a cold.

She was a fairy, a real fairy, and she had no idea how to be a fairy, and the glowgolds - *the other* glowgolds - were not trying to hurt her.

But she wasn't sure how to ask the question, not of Salt to her left nor Laughter perched above her head. (Chloe, to Bree's right, wouldn't know.)

"...Can I talk to Pyrite?" she asked Salt.

The last changeling. The one who'd been human, or tried.

"Why Pyr- oh!" said Salt. "Yes. Laughter, go get Pyrite."

Laughter fluttered away. And came back with another glowgold, who looked just like all the others.

"Changeling," he said. "It's odd to call someone else that."

"H-hi," said Bree. Chloe was craning her neck to see Pyrite around Bree. "...So you were the last one."

He nodded. "I came back when I thought I was fifteen."

"I wasn't out of my parents' orders that young..."

"It took some doing," Pyrite said.

"And you stayed here, when you found it?" Bree said. "I mean, right away?"

Pyrite smiled, not nicely. "Changeling, they left me with an *Aborigine* family. Maybe things are different now, but this was in 1902."

" *Oh* ," said Chloe, before Bree could get any words out. "What did you look like?"

Pyrite didn't answer right away, but Laughter said, "Show them," and Pyrite winced and changed. His human disguise was tall, dark, handsome, and, of faces he could have had in 1902, probably not the easiest.

"You can stop," Laughter said, when the girls had stopped staring, and Pyrite changed back. Gold just like the others, just like Bree.

"It hurts," murmured Bree. "I'm sorry."

Pyrite nodded, not making eye contact.

"What happened," said Chloe, "to the human that got traded for Changeling?"

"Oh," said Salt, "Trinket's still here."

"Where?" Chloe demanded. Bree wished she'd shut up. Bree didn't want to see her. Bree didn't want to know if they looked alike, didn't want to form opinions about which of them deserved to live in a suburb and which deserved the verdant palace, didn't want to feel responsible for a sad human-Bree or envious of a happy one, couldn't she go meet starving children in Africa instead -

"Grandmama keeps her close," Laughter said.

"She's a status symbol when there are meetings with other courts, other fairies," said Salt.

"A pet, when there aren't," said Pyrite.

"A *pet*?" asked Chloe.

"A hand-fed, literally petted pet," Pyrite said.

"When you meet Grandmama you'll see Trinket," nodded Salt.

Bree would have rather been ordered to drink battery acid.

"Grandmama?" asked Chloe.

"Our matriarch." Laughter said it, Salt echoing her. Unless Bree had mixed the nicknames up again. " *We* call her Grandmama. *You* can call her Lady Sunrise."

"Take us to see, uh, Lady Sunrise," Chloe said.

No no no - why - *no* -

"All right," said Salt. "This way."

Grandmama lived in the central pavilion of the glowgold colony. She had a throne, narrow-backed to support her spine between her wings, made of braided ebony. The throne itself was undecorated; Grandmama, who looked too young to be a mother, let alone a grandmother, *was* its decoration, yellow hair elaborately coiled back behind her ears, cloth-of-gold wrapped around her waist.

Kneeling on a cushion at the matriarch's feet was a human, dressed like a glowgold but dim and tall and wingless.

She didn't look all that much like Bree, actually. Bree's disguise matched her parents, but not in quite this way. Trinket had her - their - mother's straight nose instead of their father's snub, their father's brown hair instead of mum's blonde. Blue eyes; Bree's were hazel.

When Bree alit on the pavilion beside Salt, and Chloe climbed up, Trinket spoke, smiling: "Welcome, guests. What is your business with my lady?" Trinket's lady herself glanced at the newcomers but did not seem inclined to say anything herself.

"We," began Bree, but Chloe interrupted:

"What language is that?"

"Language?" asked Salt.

"...You can't understand her?" Bree asked.

"It sounds like gibberish. You *can* ?"

"She welcomed us and wants to know what our business with - her lady - is. What language *are* you speaking, um, Trinket?"

Trinket just blinked at her.

"She doesn't generally answer questions," Salt said in Bree's ear. "Grandmama doesn't like her to be too talkative."

"But why does she talk gibberish?" asked Chloe. "And why can - Changeling understand her?"

Pyrite caught up with them. "That's what happens when humans are brought up around fairies before they have a language of their own to hear," he said. "She's made up her own language, more or less. We can understand her the same way we could understand anything else. I had a book in English with me when I came back, and the last human couldn't read it, only fairy writing."

"But that means we can't bring her back," said Chloe.

All of the fairies looked at Chloe.

Trinket, obviously, could not understand her and continued to smile into the middle distance. She probably had to.

"She belongs to me," said Grandmama.

"Fair is fair," said Salt. "The parents got Changeling, and Grandmama gets Trinket. For as long as either can hold them."

"No matter that it's easier for Grandmama to hold a human than for human parents to hold a fairy," said Pyrite.

"I keep hearing *fair is fair*," said Bree. "What does that even *mean*?"

"To get a human child, Grandmama sends a fairy child in their place," said Salt. "If she only *took* one, with no exchange, then there would be no new children in her colony. Fair has to be fair."

"There's nothing fair about that," said Chloe.

"It's perfectly fair," says Salt. "If it weren't, we couldn't have more children."

"I get that you're talking *weird fairy language* and not English but that's not what *fair* means," exclaimed Chloe. "Their parents would never have agreed to the deal - and how is this fair to *Trinket*?"

Or me? wondered Bree, but she didn't really know if she wished she'd grown up here. However uncrumpled her wings might have been in the process. However beautiful the forest.

She didn't like the way Pyrite had flinched when Laughter had ordered him.

She did not think she was a fairy princess at all.

"Trinket didn't get anything," Chloe went on.

"Trinket has been looked after," said Grandmama, drawing her fingernails through Trinket's hair. "As she would have been in the other realm. Trinket was not at the stage of reasoning to have any part in the deal. You do not amuse me, mortal."

Trinket only smiled and blinked.

"B- Changeling didn't get anything," Chloe went on.

"You do not know of what you speak," Grandmama said.

"Changeling, can you not control your mortal?"

"Shh, Seltzer," Bree said; halfheartedly, but Chloe subsided, glowering at the matriarch.

Bree was, supposedly, three, when swapped. She'd been old enough to understand an order to keep her wings in and her glow hidden, even if she couldn't remember it now. To grow tall, to not speak until she was older.

She had been at a stage of *some* reasoning.

And now here she was, under no standing orders at all, not five meters from a human whose name she *knew*, who belonged to Grandmama.

Why would they let her be here, let her talk, let her near Trinket?

She could steal the girl away if she said the word.

They had been doing this for centuries. They wouldn't make an obvious stupid mistake like that.

"Let's go home," Bree said abruptly to Chloe. She couldn't have said why, but she didn't like the way all of the nearby glowgolds were holding still, silent.

"What? They have - they're keeping her as a *slave* !"

"And we can't do anything about it," said Bree.

There was a sort of tension in Grandmama's wings. Bree was sure she'd know what it meant if she'd grown up around other fairies.

"We can't leave her! Can't you give her orders just the same as they can? We both know what her name is!"

Bree shook her head slowly. "If I try to take her," she said, "then what's stopping them from taking me?"

"I - what's stopping them now?"

"I don't know exactly how this works," said Bree. "I'm not very good at being a fairy. But I don't want to stay and find out by doing something wrong and spending eternity here. It's pretty but I would get very, very tired of it."

"She's a person," said Chloe. "We could figure something out about her not being able to speak a real language - *you* can understand her -"

"Grandmama knows my name," Bree said, "I'm sure of it. She gave me something in my *deal* and it's mine as long as I can hold it - isn't that right? - but only as long as I don't try to take anything that's not mine. Because fair's fair."

Chloe shook her head as if to clear it. "Gave you something?"

"Mortal captors," breathed Bree. "Who could not have kept me forever. The way she can. A chance to not *have* masters, if I don't get cocky."

None of the glowgolds were replying. Most of them weren't even twitching. Grandmama was staring her down, cold-eyed and luminous, mouth a set line. She wasn't even trying to entice Bree to stay. Maybe she thought that no matter what wonders the mortal

realm held Bree would come back eventually. They were, after all, immortal.

But -

"I'm sorry, Trinket," said Bree. "But I don't think you can come home to our parents. At least, I can't help you." She swallowed. "But they would've loved you."

Trinket blinked and smiled. Bree couldn't read her eyes to see contentment or screaming or confusion or anything else.

"Come on," Bree said to Chloe, and she fluttered down from the treehouse palace, waited at the base of the ladder for her friend's reluctant descent, and lit their way back to the gate. It wasn't so hard to find the path through the jungle after all.

The glowgolds didn't try to stop them.

Fair was fair.

Sendaway

This story was inspired by a [Tumblr post](#) (warning, spoilers) .

Reet Moque went wading in the surf and wondered how far out she'd have to swim before she found a sea-death. They sometimes came in as near as the shore, supposedly, but usually not, usually you'd only find any from a boat. Moque wondered how hard it would be to kill a sea-death if she found one.

Probably, however hard it was to find a sea-death, it would be much harder to track down the specific sea-death that had taken her papa.

But she could maybe find another sea-death that would otherwise take somebody else's papa, and somehow overpower a creature bigger than her house. Somehow. And drive a sword into its eye -

Well, nobody was going to sell a deathbane sword to a twelve-year-old of no family, and she didn't know how to hold one anyway, and stabbing it with anything else would just make more deaths. Which would then eat her. Moque kicked the sand and turned around to go home.

She felt Eypa's shadow on her shoulder before the bird landed. "I haven't seen you," said Eypa. "Where have you been?"

"Papa died," said Moque, in a still, minimal voice. "I had to help our friends bury him, and say the Sendaway, and sit in mourning. What do dunlins do when other dunlins die?"

"Regular ones or me?" peeped Eypa. Eypa produced no comforting gestures; she had no fingers to run through Moque's hair and no pan of sweets to coax down Moque's throat and not enough control

over how her voice sounded to lower and smooth it for Moque's ears. After four days of tenderly hovering neighbors, Moque was glad of the variety.

"Whichever."

"Well, the answer is nothing either way, the others don't scarcely notice and I am hardly friends with them since they can't speak or think to speak or think of. But if *you* died I'd make a human teach me the Sendaway to say for you, if you liked."

Moque reached up to pet Eypa's feathers. Eypa permitted it, though as soon as Moque's hand fell away she preened her wing to put everything back in place. "I don't know what I'm going to do now," Moque said.

"Do?" asked Eypa.

"Without Papa."

"Why not do what you usually do? Make sandcastles and go to the shrine and play with that nasty little boy and talk to me."

"He isn't nasty, he just doesn't like birds."

"But you contradict yourself. Well?"

"I could try just doing that, but I don't have a job, and eventually I wouldn't be able to buy food."

"Oh. And you -"

"I can't eat bugs and snails like you. Even though they're free and even though I'm sure you'd help me find them."

"You could catch fish, you eat those."

"I don't know how to fish. I could learn, I guess, before the money runs out, but I don't think I want to be a fisher really." Not without a deathbane sword in case of monster attack.

"Oh." Eypa considered this. "I don't know what you're going to do either."

Papa had friends. Moque had friends, too. She could probably get someone to take her in. But none of the friends were so close, or so possessed of spare money and space, that they assumed she *would* ask them rather than someone else. They hadn't started preemptively moving her things out of Papa's house, started rearranging their chore schedules to include her and set an extra place at the table. So, she had time to think.

Moque could look after herself, but sooner or later a neighbor or a friend would take exception to a twelve-year-old girl living there by herself, would suggest more or less forcefully that she sell it to some nice couple looking to start a family in a place of their own and fold herself into an occupied home.

She sat on her front steps and ate her last little sandwich.

The neighbor dog trotted by. He was a shaggy salt-and-pepper shepherd who, as a one-time wizard's familiar, could speak just like Eypa. He paused, looked at Moque, and went up to lie next to her on the steps and silently invite petting. She scratched him behind the ears.

"We're all going to be the poorer for Cors's loss," he said, after a minute.

"I know," murmured Moque.

"You'll let us know if you need anything, won't you, little miss Moque?" asked the dog.

She nodded. The dog licked her face, then went on about his business.

Moque didn't want to move in with the family the dog lived with, or with the boy who didn't like birds even though he had compensatory virtues, or with Papa's friend from the herring boat who had not been well enough for sailing the day the sea-death swallowed it.

If only Moque had a mother she wouldn't be at such a loss, but Papa had always bizarrely maintained that Moque did not have such a person - not that she was dead, which would have been ordinary enough, but that she did not have one.

Presented with a dilemma that having a mother would solve, Moque suddenly found this absurdity more pressing to investigate than she had before.

Moque went back indoors.

She went into Papa's closet, and pulled out the little old box that she'd never been allowed to look inside. She didn't think he'd meant to keep the contents secret forever and now he wasn't alive to locate the edges of not-forever.

The box was nailed shut. She had to detour to the toolbag, and saw off the corners of the lid, but then it lifted easily.

Inside, she found:

A small square of fabric, dyed gold, with a longsword embroidered on it, white-bladed and silver-hilted - the Deathsbane crest.

A travel passbook from Charata City for someone named "Mr. Kelur Antre".

A cable of gold chain, anklet-sized - a wedding bangle, a *fancy* one.

Moque didn't know exactly what to make of all this, but finding out sounded like a better plan than moping in Papa's empty house until somebody bustled her over to their dinner table, their squishy bedrooms with three children in them already, their hearths kept too cool and their soup served too hot.

Moque got a knapsack and her best shoes. She packed the contents of the little box, and enough food for five days, and all of the money she had left.

And she locked the door, left a note stuck to it for the curious neighbors, and started walking.

She knew where to find Charata City.

Eypa caught up to her when Moque had been hiking south for less than an hour. "Where are you going?" asked the sandpiper.

"Charata City," said Moque. "Do you want to come?"

"Ooh, I don't think so. I've been there before and I came here, didn't I? Even if the only other speaking animal here is that bore of a dog."

"He's nice."

"Did I say otherwise? But no, I don't think so. Keep a lookout, will you?"

"Yeah," murmured Moque. She didn't think there were a lot of woods-deaths in the forest she'd need to traverse, but she might not be lucky, and there were lesser dangers than those which could be quite the hazard to a twelve-year-old girl anyway.

But there was no reason deaths couldn't come to the village too.

She petted Eypa and left.

Moque had been to the village just south of hers before, years ago, and Charata City was a few towns beyond that. All she had to do was walk along the beach. The weather was fine, so she slept on the shore rather than trouble the villagers for space on the hearth. The sand was soft enough and she picked up and moved on at dawn. It was - not exactly physically comfortable; her feet ached after the first few hours hiking, the sea was too cold to get sand off of herself with, and her rolls did not stay moist and chewy for long - but soul-comfortable. She was not moping at home because Papa was gone. She was going somewhere, to find something out, and then perhaps do something about it.

There was a cliff that she encountered on the third day of her walk which obliged her to climb up the beach and the hills and go a ways into the woods to get around it. She probably looked like quite the ragamuffin, sandy with tangled hair, but she wasn't planning to stop where anyone would care.

She wasn't planning on it until she heard screaming, and turned to look, and saw more than a dozen people hurtling out of the woods past her. One of them, a large man, spotted her, veered in her direction, and before she could decide which way to try to run, scooped her up with his arm around her waist and kept going in his original direction, stride unbroken.

Moque couldn't protest immediately, because the wind was knocked out of her, but when she'd gotten her breath back, she yelled. "PUT ME DOWN!"

"Woods-death," panted the man. "Got a bunker. Lit the beacon."

Oh. That was an entirely sensible reason to pick up a strange girl and carry her off, really, and explained the other dozen screaming people. Moque couldn't see the woods-death through the trees. It

might be in the middle of eating someone who hadn't been fast enough, or it might be up in the canopy -

The man carrying Moque tripped. Moque landed under him and squirmed out of the way to get her own feet under her and tear in the direction of the fleeing people. Probably faster than making him carry her, slight though she was. He was up and following a moment later and made no further attempt to lift her off the ground.

The bunker was only four minutes of desperate running away from where they'd intercepted Moque. It was set into one of those foothills she'd climbed over, but she hadn't noticed the slats of the door at the time.

It was locked. A spindly woman who looked like she'd bolted in the middle of kneading bread, flour on her sleeves and an apron tied around her waist, had a key; soon they were all inside in the dark and the door was locked again.

"Do you think any of the Gressens got out?" someone asked.

"Wouldn't leave the old lady."

"Stay within sight of the door in case, they don't have a key, and I didn't see that merchant fellow either - girl, who are you?"

"I'm Reet Moque," said Moque. "I was on my way to Charata City. Can I watch the door?"

"More power to you," said someone in shuddering tones.

Moque pressed her face to the peephole. Woods. Woods and more woods. She didn't hear much of anything, but deaths were shockingly quiet for their size.

And then she spotted it.

It was completely black. There was blood dripping from its jaws, and when it touched one of its six clawed feet to a tree or scraped yard-deep furrows in the ground it left bloody footprints, but just from being in contact with the death's exoskeleton the blood had gone black, too. She could see almost nothing but its silhouette and its eye.

She looked the death right in the pulsing blue glow of its eye and she wanted to *stab* it, it was a huge target, Moque could have stood upright in its eye socket, she could stab if it she had half a chance but she didn't have a *sword* she wanted a *sword* -

"Do we think this thing will hold?" wondered a boy. "The other bunker, will that one hold -? My mother -"

"This one has held before," said the man who'd carried Moque, if she didn't miss her guess about his voice, "so's the other. Just wait for the Deathbane. They'll see the beacon, they'll follow the footprints, they'll get it."

And then it would be gotten, which Moque admitted to herself was the important thing.

The death approached the bunker. Moque knew that it could have crossed the distance faster than she could scream, but it wasn't in a hurry; it slunk. It dragged its jaws along the ground and made a wet inhaling noise. Smelling their trail. Smelling them. Its eye shone like the sky on a clear day and did not blink.

And then she heard hoofbeats.

The other people in the bunker with her made whimpering noises of hope.

Moque squinted through the peephole, shaking with *envy* for whoever was on that horse.

The death snapped its head up and *moved* .

And so did the armored knight on her armored horse, sword flashing. She leapt off her horse in some gymnastic maneuver and made it onto the broad flat plate of the death's upper back. The death rolled; the knight clung to a plate-edge. When it had its claws under it again the death unpeeled a forked tail from its underbelly and whipped it up towards the knight, but she was already climbing onto its head, out of the tail's reach. Its head tossed, its eye shone, and the knight was flung against the hillside so hard that Moque could *feel* the impact, against her cheek, through the door.

The woods-death was distracted by the horse, flailing and neighing either in a trained maneuver to divert deathly attention or in natural fear. The death closed its teeth, each as long as one of the horse's legs, on the top half of the rearing animal. Fangs screeched awfully against barding; blackened blood or spittle smeared on the exposed mane where it peeked through the wide-spaced needles.

The knight lopped the death's tail off and the death spat out the limp horse and spun to face her.

And she plunged her sword into its eye, and the glow snuffed out.

The villagers wouldn't let Moque open the bunker door immediately, even though she assured them the death was no longer moving or glowing. They waited, and Moque pressed her face to her peephole. Finally, after waiting for a few minutes, watching the death, the knight set down her sword and took her armor off, piece by piece, wincing, hissing. She limped over to her horse and confirmed that it was dead. And at last the knight called, "Anyone in there?"

"Yes!" said Moque. "A bunch of us!"

"You can come out now!"

And with that someone finally unlocked the door, and everyone came out, squinting, into the light.

Moque ran right up to the knight, who was trying to roll her left shoulder and not getting far, and prodding her ribs with her right hand. "That was amazing," Moque said. "I watched the whole thing. Where did you get your sword? Can I hold it?"

The knight looked at her, half-smiling, then - gestured invitingly to the sword where it lay black-stained in the grass.

It was very heavy, and much of the weight was feet away from the hilt; Moque had to grip it with both hands to keep it under control. The knight had wielded it one-handed. " *Wow* ."

"You can wipe it off on the grass for me if you like."

Moque did not do this as smoothly as she supposed the knight would have done if uninjured, but she got the death's blood off of the bone-white blade eventually, dragging it after her to fresh patches of grass twice. "I want a sword."

"Well," said the knight, "you might need to save up a bit and start with a smaller one."

"Will they just sell deathsbane swords? In stores? To anybody?"

"Oh, you want a *deathsbane* sword -" Someone from the village tapped the knight on her good shoulder. "Yes?"

"All our thanks, Lady. May we have your name? Is it safe to burn the death here? What about your animal?"

"I'm Deathsbane Intara. Make a firebreak, but yes, burn it here," advised the knight. "Don't let animals graze where the death has passed until after the next frost has been and gone. The bigger plates might survive the fire, and after the frost you can take them

safely, if you have a use for such things. I've seen people use them in furniture and such. I'll get the armor off my horse before I go. Burn the horse too, unless you want to eat her. The ichor on her isn't going to poison you or your dogs, our horses are almost as warded as we are, it's neutralized, but it won't taste very good. Leave my armor and the horse's somewhere safe in your village. Someone will be by to pick it up within the fortnight."

"Yes, Lady Intara," said the villager.

Moque was sitting on the grass, sword propped with its hilt on her thigh, looking raptly at Lady Intara, still, who looked back down at her. "As I was saying," Intara said. "Most of the deathbane swords in this part of the world are made for the Deathbane *family*, by the family wizards - Deathbanes who can't do field work pick up magic. I'm not even sure how much a sword like mine would cost on the open market if you found one. It might be a matter of more than saving up, at least unless you want to move all the way out of the country."

"Oh," said Moque.

"What's your name? Do you live here?"

"Reet Moque. I live three days' north. I'm going to Charata City."

"All by yourself?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Lady Intara, "I'm going back to Charata City myself. That's where Deathbanes live when we aren't at outposts to respond to beacons like the one that brought me here, so it's where I need to be to recover from all my injuries. We might as well walk together, especially since you look about ten and I have a broken shoulder."

"I'm twelve," said Moque.

"Oh? When will you be thirteen?"

"Midwinter," said Moque.

"Hm," said Intara. "But in any case, do you want to come with me?"

"Yes," said Moque at once.

Without Intara's horse, it was two days on foot to Charata City; luckily the lady knight could still walk. Moque accompanied her, sometimes carried the sword (in its scabbard) for her, and asked questions every time Intara paused in describing the Deathsbane compound.

"There are a lot of us," Intara explained. "More every generation. Fifty years ago we could fit snugly in one big house, as long as we weren't all home at the same time, and we never are, because we have to spread out to be ready for deaths. Now we have four houses that size, and more buildings besides - training grounds and the stables and such."

"And it's only Deathsbanes who live there?" asked Moque.

"Some people marry Deathsbanes and take the name, and they can live in the compound with us," said Intara. "And we hire people to do things like cook, and fetch armor we have to leave behind like I just did, and maintain the beacons, and they aren't Deathsbanes at all. But only born Deathsbanes get the training and swords."

"Oh."

"Still stuck on that, huh?"

"You killed it," said Moque fervently, as they approached a farmhouse. Lady Intara, unlike a wandering girl of no particular family, had a good chance of being offered a place by the hearth for herself and a traveling companion if she knocked on any door. "If you hadn't killed it it would've just - kept going. A sea-death killed my *papa*," Moque added, as though she needed additional reason to hero-worship Deathsbanes. "They all need swords in their eye and you got hurt and you could've died but you showed up anyway."

"We don't have a very good way to hunt down sea-deaths, yet," said Intara.

" *Still* ."

"Hm," said Intara, and she knocked at the farmhouse, and talked to the woman who answered the door, and they were indeed offered pallets near the fire ("for you and your little squire", and Intara was kind enough not to correct her).

Moque lay awake staring at the rafters in the firelight and wanting the weight of the sword to belong to her.

They reached the city the following dusk, just as the city lanterns were being lit. Intara was recognized, greeted: "Thank you Lady!" "Knight! Look, darling, a knight!" "My lady, some water for you?" She nodded at everyone, took the water, led Moque through winding streets that were knobbly under their feet.

Moque looked at a juggler, a busker, a cart selling baked apples - and wrenched her eyes away to jog after the knight.

"What were you going to do once you got to the city?" asked Intara. "If it's not eat baked apples."

"I - I don't know," said Moque. "When Papa died I went through some of his things, and there was a passbook for somebody I never

heard of, from here."

"Who?" wondered Intara.

"I don't know how to pronounce it exactly -" Moque dug out the passbook. "Kelur Antre? Do you know a Kelur family?"

"I... don't know the family," said Intara. "But I've heard of one person by that name. Your family is Reet, right?"

"Do you know Reets?"

"Only you, little squire. But we can ask the other Deathsbanes, how does that sound? All together we know a whole lot of people."

Moque nodded.

"Do you really not want a baked apple, or did you just not want to lose me in the crowd?" Intara added, with a faint, warm smile.

"I kind of want a baked apple," Moque admitted.

Intara bought her one. Moque savored the treat and followed Intara as they cut through the heart of the city to reach the Deathsbane compound.

It was beautiful. Not opulent, nor even particularly cunningly designed - Moque doubted very much that people went to stare at it for its architecture. It was plain and the corners were sharp and the layout was simple. It was a set of buildings designed, with ruthless clarity, for its efficiency at housing and supporting Deathsbanes so that they could efficiently kill deaths.

There were a few people crisscrossing the yard. Someone with a basket of laundry. Someone with a horse on a longe line, in a fenced section by the stable. Someone leading a group of little Deathsbane

children, all younger than Moque, all going for a jog, chanting call-and-responses together as they went.

The man with the laundry stumbled and scrambled to catch a square of fabric. Pale gold. Embroidered with a sword.

Intara led Moque to a front entrance of one of the buildings. There was no entryway, they just stepped immediately into what looked like a living room - fire in the middle, roaring high and hot, and knights and children and old mages resting around it.

"Family," Intara said, addressing them all with one fell swoop. "This is Moque. She's looking for someone who might have known a Kelur Antre."

The Deathsbanes all looked at Moque. Moque stood up taller and held out the passbook.

And then she got out her fabric square, and her wedding bangle.

And a woman sitting close to the fire got up, and came close, and knelt so she was eye to eye with Moque.

"Go get patched up, Intara," she told the lady knight. "I'll take it from here."

"Of course," said Intara, and she went back out the door again.

"H-hello," said Moque.

"Hello," said the woman, taking the passbook, the fabric, the bangle. "Where did you find these?"

"In Papa's secret box. After he died."

"Come sit by the fire with us." She led her to the couch; it had just the right amount of squash in the cushions. "Where did you grow up, Moque?"

"Five days' walking north of here. On the beach. What does this have to do with anything?"

"It might have a lot to do with everything. How old are you exactly?"

"I'll be thirteen Midwinter. Lady."

"No need to be so formal." But she didn't give Moque another name to use. "What did your papa look like?"

"Like me. Well, but taller and a man, and he had his hair longer. I have his eyes."

"Moque," said the woman, "will you bear with me for a minute if I tell you a story?"

"All right," allowed Moque.

"About fourteen years ago a Deathsbane lady knight named Mirials wed outside the family. She married a fellow named Kelur Antre and they were very happy and soon enough they had a little daughter and named her Alcessa. And it is customary for newborn Deathsbanes like Alcessa to be knighted right away, even though they won't be full knights until later. But Antre didn't like that at all. He wasn't supposed to find out - it's a Deathsbane thing and he wasn't supposed to see. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. And when he saw, he decided to kidnap Alcessa and run away with her and go into hiding. Mirials looked - and so did her brothers and sisters and cousins and parents. It took months to track Antre down."

There was a shiver creeping up Moque's spine. "Then what?"

"I was the one who cornered him, and it was way up north, at a huge waterfall. And I said, 'Give back the baby, Antre, and we'll have no quarrel', and Antre held the baby over the edge of the river."

Moque gulped. "Wh-why didn't he want to give her back," she murmured.

"He didn't say. He just said that the Deathsbanes had better stop looking for him, that he wasn't letting us get Alcessa back, not ever, no matter what."

The shiver was turning into a spider of ice across Moque's back. "Did he mean it?"

"We don't know," said the knight. "Maybe it was an empty threat. But we let him go."

Moque clenched the bangle and the golden blanket in her fist. "And he moved to a fishing village and changed their names and told her she didn't have a mother, until a sea-death ate him."

"Hello, daughter," said the woman, and without either of them clearly deciding to do it first, they embraced.

Deathsbane Alcessa, Moque to her friends, had a sword on its way.

The forges were hot and her grandfather was hammering it into shape while her third cousin, once removed, layered spells into its blade. She would be old enough to really use it in five or six years, but old enough to start catching up on learning how as soon as it was cooled. Moque had her own room in the dormitory wing with the other Deathsbane children and she ate three meals a day all of which were *delicious* and none of which she had to cook. She was studying like mad, because there was a curriculum and she'd only get busier once she had her sword, and she'd missed twelve years of it thanks to *Kelur Antre* .

Deathsbane Alcessa, Moque to herself, had a mother.

Mirials loved her and wanted to hug her, rocking, and sing her a song - "Just once, please? I know you're a little old for it but I never got to" - and showed her where everything was and introduced her to all the Family and brought her along to convey their joint gratitude to Intara, laid up with her broken ribs and shoulder in the infirmary. Mirials started teaching her to ride a horse and assemble a suit of armor and memorize how to get to all the outposts in the country for when she was sent, one day, to park close to a far-off cluster of villages in case one of their beacons went up in flames.

Deathsbane Alcessa, Moque to her papa - did not see how this added up.

"I don't understand why he would take me," she told Mirials, sitting beside her at supper after having raced the other children all afternoon to improve her conditioning. "What's so bad about knighting a baby Deathsbane?"

"Oh," sighed Mirials. "...Perhaps I'd better just show you."

"Show me what?"

"The sword we use to knight the new ones."

They finished their dinner and Moque dragged tired feet after her mother and they went up to the highest part of the oldest building in the compound.

The attic was low-ceilinged, but clean, and there was a cloth-draped table dominating the space, and on it was a Deathsbane sword. Unremarkable as those went.

Until it spoke.

"Mirials. Alcessa," rumbled the sword.

Moque knew that animals could talk, if wizards used them as familiars. She did not know that swords could talk.

"I've brought Alcessa here to explain about knighting," Mirials said.

"Talking sword," Moque mouthed but didn't voice.

"I will tell you the story," the sword said. "Sit, children."

Mirials sat at once. Moque followed after a moment's stunned hesitation.

"The first Deathsbane was born almost two hundred years ago," said the sword. "He was a mage as well as a knight, and he had already performed a great triumph in making a weapon that could kill deaths without multiplying them. But he saw how few people wanted this task. He could have made a dozen more swords, and those willing to take them up even in crisis, let alone make themselves ready to fight deaths, would have been few, perhaps none. And he would not live forever."

Mirials had her eyes closed and nodded along to the story. She had heard it before. She liked this story.

"And so he worked a still greater magic. Animals may become people, exposed to magic, but they are new people. The first Deathsbane wished for his sword to become *him* and give his drive and his will to those who took it up, because every death slain was dozens, even hundreds of lives saved."

Moque closed her eyes too.

"He succeeded. His personality was copied into me. And when an unformed mind contacts me, the same personality goes into them. The first Deathsbane's three daughters were the next generation, and their children the next, and on and on, until now."

"So what Papa saw," Moque murmured, "was -"

"Was me holding a sword over you and saying part of the Sendaway. It's only one verse. You didn't *die*," Mirials said, just as softly. "You were never even scratched. A Deathsbane sword only cuts what its wielder wants cut. But it's part of the ceremony out of respect for who you would have been unknighthed. Antre came in at just the wrong moment, and he didn't understand, when I explained."

"Oh," said Moque.

"Depart now," said the sword. "I will hear the evening's reports soon in privacy."

"Yes, Grandfather," said Mirials.

Grandfather.

Mirials took Moque's hand and pulled her to her feet and led her out of the attic.

The new sword was ready.

She could collect it and turn up for her lesson at six in the morning and learn to make it part of her arm. She could stay, where everyone knew *just* how to teach kids like her, *just* what temperature she thought soup should be served at, *just* how she'd like her hair cut, because for two hundred years, these things had all been just so, and she was just the same.

She could run away like Papa. She could wait a week, for her new cousin to be delivered, and snatch the babe before he or she was sent away in favor of a new Deathsbane.

A new baby who'd pick up their own sword and wait in outposts far from home for weeks on end just in case someone needed

Deathsbane expertise to kill a death that would otherwise eat *their* babies. She could stop the baby from growing up like that and instead she could put it on a doorstep in the middle of nowhere and it could farm oats.

In the end it wasn't much of a choice.

Deathsbane Alcessa took up her sword.

Queen

This story is set in the same universe as [Visitor](#) and [Changeling](#).

This story is also available in audio, which you may find on [this episode of Wingardcast](#).

She opens her eyes in a bubble of air at the bottom of a lake, so deep and so dark that she does not know if it is night or day at the surface, cannot discern the silver color of her own hands in front of her face.

She knows other things, though.

She knows how to breathe, speak, sit up, stretch her wings.

She knows that if she swims up from her bubble, she will eventually find the lake surface, and air and light and plants and fairies.

She knows her name.

She knows *everyone's* name.

She starts calling herself Bubble, immediately. It is not a very good name, but Bubble wants rid of hers as soon as possible. If she doesn't know it, she can't let it slip. If she manages to be Bubble, so hard and so consistently, that she cannot remember what she woke up knowing under the lake, then she will be safe. She thinks safety is very scarce outside of the lake.

She dreams enormous dreams, dreams the size of all the world. She picks fruit from the trees on the shore, every day, and sinks under the water to curl up in her air pocket, every night. She is cautious -

but she imagines palaces and armies and consorts and everyone knowing that she reigns supreme. She is lucky, but luck will not be enough if she is not also smart. Her luck will be someone else's tool if she makes a mistake. They can't *hurt* her - but there are ways and ways.

Bubble will not be seduced. Bubble will not be driven mad in a cage in the dark until she will name herself just to see flowers and starlight. Bubble will not be caught off guard.

Bubble will be queen.

She explores the space around the lake. There are dozens of fairies who visit it for water now and then; a handful live at the shore. In a burrow in the sand, in a treehouse, in a cairn made out of the river stones, out in the open getting rained on once a week when clouds overtake the sky in their scheduled time. No courts interact with the lake, and this decides Bubble's initial strategy.

Bubble might be able to subvert an entire court by finding its master and whispering thereto, but she would be dealing with a fairy with *practice*, a fairy who had held vassals for years, centuries, millennia, who knew how to word things and how to see where there were gaps.

Bubble has no practice. Taking a whole court would be efficient if she succeeded, but she would be so likely to fail. And she is not in much of a hurry.

She takes the fairies who live near the lake. One by one. She tells them *hold*, makes them be still. Permits them to speak only to critique the wordings she's devised for contingencies and threats and guarantees and forbiddances and permissions.

They can think of very few mistakes. Bubble is very good at this.

Bubble works her servants over until every escape is patched, every hope of defiance or retaliation transparently worthless. She doesn't hurt them because they don't try to resist. If they can get good things by trying to please her, and it is really, completely impossible to get away from her, then they will try to please her in thought and word as well as by obedience.

Bubble connects names to faces for the fairies who visit the lake for their water, and Bubble's servants snare them for her, and then there are dozens.

And these fairies have neighbors.

Some of those neighbors have courts.

It's so easy. She doesn't take it lightly, she treats every step with care and caution, but it's *easy*. The Queen laughs and her power spiderwebs out from her lake in all directions.

Courts have structure.

It is *tedious* to give a hundred thousand fairies all personal instructions, even if you can assemble them in groups and shout. Worse when they hate you; simpler when they fear you or love you; but tedious any which way. Courts have layers and sections and branches and satellites, and the Queen's court has more than others, because her court is *whoever she likes*.

She winnows, after she's taken the whole great crescent island for herself. She means to go over the glittering ocean - and under it, too, there are rainbowfin courts there - but first she must get her things in order. Useless servants are dismissed - forbidden to speak or act against her or her own, but they may go about their business in bits of the land she doesn't care about, isn't using. Those with theoretical value but rebellious attitudes are punished. She isn't a *sadist*, or at least she doesn't think so, but she can't be facing

hostility at every turn, which means it must become an instant personal disaster for any fairy to offer her any.

The Queen gains skill, between tutelage from her vassals with experience in mastery and sheer practice, in making those personal disasters terrifying by rumor and tailored to break whoever has earned one.

But not every fairy is opposed to the regime. Some of them were under harsher masters than her, eager to be eased out from under their old yokes and given lighter ones. Some of them enjoy being cogs of an unstoppable juggernaut of sovereign unanimity. Some of them admire their Queen personally, for her power, her beauty, her wit.

Courts have structure, and it is nothing if not traditional for that structure to include room for a handful of favorites.

Some of the favorites are great sorcerers, excellent multipliers of power, who defend her and build her edifices and see to her comfort and channel her resources into the finest products ever seen in the world. Some of the favorites are cunning masters - breeder matriarchs and vassal-collectors who know how to be just *so* with words and minds and networks, and will tell her just how, rearranging the court until it all works just how she likes it without burdensome intervention from her.

A few of the favorites are pretty and smiling and affectionate, and there would be no point to being Queen if she could not have such things.

Her favorite of favorites is a dark-eyed lace-swift going by *Satin*, who comes up to her shoulder. He dances, when she asks him to, leaping with slim legs and gesturing with delicate hands. He has wings like fine nets of white which can keep him aloft for months if he doesn't care to land, if he drinks rain and eats floating seeds. He seeks her out. He was in one of the small courts she absorbed, kept for his

beauty there, too, and he wants her to think that he's lovely, to want to look at him, to reach out for his moon-pale face.

He is so lovely, and the Queen *wants* , and she has no reason to deny herself anything she wants, not ever, she is so *lucky* .

She takes. She consolidates. Her sorcerers pull her bubble out of the bottom of her lake for her, and she pulls her favorite wordsmiths into it with her and goes into the ocean and takes the rainbowfins. She is almost ready to go across it. There are continents and continents and she wants them all and why shouldn't she have them?

Satin is allowed to say whatever he likes. Under the stars on her balcony he strokes her arm, the edge of her wing - suggests that he could fly across first, make a present to her of all he can learn about the way the far continent is laid out.

The Queen kisses him and says he may.

She was not careful to make him honest or make him tethered.

She cannot find him anywhere.

Satin warned the fairies on the far continent before he disappeared, that a Queen was coming, that she knew all their names. This makes it slightly more difficult to colonize. Her advantage is still overwhelming and she takes and takes and *takes* . She will have everything and tear it apart until she finds the traitor. It is only expected that servants will object to being commanded. They must be punished, but it's all business. Satin is in another category entirely.

The Queen delegates. She organizes. She commands. She recites names until she's breathless. She sleeps under guard. She is crueller to those she has cause to harm.

He is not on this continent. He is not on the next. Satin has been fleeing for his freedom for five hundred years before a Queenscourt band of sorcerers catches up with him and brings him to her.

The Queen offers to let Constellation, one of her current favorites - there are two, neither so trusted as Satin once was, not ever again - punish Satin under her supervision.

Constellation hesitates. Too long.

The Queen bids Constellation *hold* and asks Lucid if *she'd* like to try. On Satin, on Constellation too, on anyone who comes close and will not *belong* to their Queen.

Lucid doesn't so much as blink before she obeys.

Lucid's kind doesn't have to sleep. The screaming lasts for decades, pausing only when the Queen wants Lucid's attention on herself, instead. Lucid switches tasks when the Queen asks, instantly.

The Queen doubts, eventually, whether this is Lucid's loyalty or her fear or her sheer fascination with sandpaper and acid -

She doesn't like not being able to tell. She does not know how to root out the uncertainty. She can command her fairies not to lie, she can even command them to spend hours introspecting. But she cannot guarantee that their answers will be right. She is terrifying. They will be terrified; or they will sublimate their terror until they can't tell her that it's there no matter how she demands their sincerity.

The true map of her subjects' emotions is not something she can *take* .

Lucid goes to a position of honor in a satellite court and Satin goes into the dungeon and Constellation is turned into a bird and flung out the window. The Queen takes no new lovers. She colonizes. She

prunes her court. She bids the promising learn magic and the useless get out of her sight.

She has palaces. She has armies. She has all of the names in the world. She must keep all of these things or the consequences will be intolerable. She issues orders and organizes tasks.

She visits Satin in the dungeon, sometimes, and looks at him where he is kept continually drowning in a glass bowl, and she does not know the map of her own emotions, either.

The Queen goes about her business.

Threshold

This story has a sequel, [Lilac](#). This story is also available in audio, which you may find on [this episode of Wingardcast](#).

"Is anybody in this classroom tweaked?" the ethics professor asked. "Er - never mind, that's backwards, I'm not supposed to ask about - If anyone in this classroom is tweaked *or* sensitive to the subject, they may be excused for this class and Wednesday's."

"Why?" asked Mercy.

"Campus policy is that I have to warn you that the discussion topic for the day may be distressing for tweaked individuals and those close to them. And anyone sensitive to the topic for other reasons. There will be discussion of historical anti-tweaking arguments, among other related topics."

"Do potentially distressed people *have* to leave?"

The professor shook his head. "You can stay, I just have to warn you. If you do leave you're excused from the associated reading and the section on the test."

Mercy was tempted - she could probably make good progress on her art project with that time, or, more realistically, she could binge-watch a lot of TV - but she stayed put. Lyle, sitting next to her, nudged her foot, looking nervous.

"I think I'll be fine," Mercy said, mostly to Lyle, but the professor took her as representative of the whole class and proceeded with his slideshow ("*Tweaking: Prenatal Genetic and Epigenetic Alterations*").

Mercy lasted ten minutes and then snapped to the professor that she would be skipping this section on the test and gathered her belongings and stormed out.

"You're not fine," Lyle observed, following at a half-jog as Mercy fumbled her books into her knapsack and stomped away from the lecture hall.

"I thought it was going to be - I would be fine if he'd stood there and told me that great thinkers were of the opinion that I wasn't worth the *expense* !" hissed Mercy. "Or the health risks to Mother however much better things have gotten - or the research allocations that let them improve that much. I was expecting him to tell me that I should have been *aborted* . I could have coped with that. But no, he respectfully trots out and engages arguments that say I should have been born *sick* ? That my wholeness is an affront to human *dignity* ? That I am - that - *ugh* ! I should have left."

"Can I *help* ?" asked Lyle, wringing his hands. "Do you - what do you do when you're stressed out? Hit the gym? Eat ice cream? Go to church?"

Of course he'd ask about church; his project was on her religion. So she obliged him. "Sometimes I *do* go to church, and at another time of the week I could turn up and volunteer to help with the preschool - I should show you the church preschool sometime before you turn in your project - but the bus to the church doesn't run at this hour. And the place would be empty right now anyway. God's ministry is in words and deeds and fellowship, not consecrated dead places, an empty church might as well be an abandoned warehouse. I'll take the ice cream plan if you're buying. Is that within the scope of your research?"

"Can do," said Lyle.

He found them a gelato place. The cashier called Mercy Lyle's sister; Mercy corrected her. She got pistachio, and ate it angrily.

"...So," said Lyle. "I kind of hate to ask, but I have a grade riding on this."

"Yes, of course," sighed Mercy. "Go ahead."

"So I gather Conceptual Christianity feels very strongly pro-tweaking. Or at least has room for such opinions."

"Do you want me to quote things at you or just - talk?"

"Both, ideally," says Lyle. "You're a lay case study, not a minister, but if you can call quotes to *mind* ..."

"Conceptual activists were actually instrumental in lobbying in favor of tweaking back when it was first viable for the consumer market," Mercy said. "It is not an exaggeration to say that but for the grace of God I would not be healthy today."

"Can I ask what you were tweaked *for*?"

"I don't actually know," says Mercy. "I suppose I'll find out once I'm managing my own medical care but I never bothered to ask my parents. I only know that I was tweaked at all because my father mentions it when they're saying their gratitudes."

"And why does the church feel that way?"

"That which - this is a quote, although I won't get it perfect, look it up for your project - that which God makes is whole and perfect but may be corrupted by men or by nature. To shape things more like the way God would have had them be is God's work. Deliberately preserving things in states where they have constrained potential is as evil as constraining that potential in the first place. If you would not take a healthy child and break its spine or give it a lobotomy,

you must not turn aside the chance to heal one who could be born healthy with your intervention."

"Quoting who?" asked Lyle.

"My namesake. The Reverend Mercy Small, no puns please."

"I wouldn't," said Lyle.

Mercy's next class, unlike the morning's ethics lecture, was comfortably within the scope of her major. Simulation Engineering 202. There was a sign on the door when she and Lyle arrived; cancelled, continuing equipment failure, techs are on it, read chapters thirteen through fourteen.

"Wish I'd taken the practical last semester and the theoretical now when they're having all this hardware trouble," Mercy sighed.

"Do you want me to leave you alone while you read chapters thirteen through fourteen?" inquired Lyle.

"I already read them, last weekend. Routing around simulation nesting, physics engines and how to cut corners on them for computationally small projects, self-insertion and dreamlikeness or Why You Can't Count Higher Than Two In Sim. Large aside on how you never ever ever sim anyone under age sixteen no matter what. I assume I'm boring you, poor anthropologist. Dash it all, I finished my midterm project *early*, I wanted to run my sim, but the techs can't figure out what's wrong with these machines. I might not bother coming again Friday unless I've gotten a message saying class *is* on."

"Yeah? What were you going to try?"

"Releasing a tiger into a soccer practice. It'd make my lab partner laugh. I had a backup plan to make it a wallaby instead, in case the

professor thought there was much chance of threshold; if we had to wake somebody up they'd resent the tiger. In addition to finding themselves prematurely silicized. I did make sure nobody on the soccer team is an Orthodox New Millennium's Child or otherwise hung up about it, first. I'm not sure what the issue Orthodox folks have is - is it literally the sim depiction, or the possibility of having an extra of someone in particular, or do they just object to threshold no matter what? You're the one studying modern religion, you tell me."

Lyle snorted softly. "I haven't made a study of New Millennium's Children, but I think I've heard it's the third thing."

"Really, threshold's not a huge risk if you know what you're doing," Mercy assured him. "Sims are started and stopped every day with no greater odds of turning into subjective experiences than an unusually bright parrot. Not that we don't have assorted protestors outside the building sometimes calling us abortionists. I suppose it's better that they're bothering us and not traumatized pregnant women. I have no such saving grace for the ones calling us soul-stealers."

"Mercy?" said Lyle.

"Mm?"

"Can I get you to ask your parents what you were tweaked for?"

"For your project?"

"Yes."

"I don't see why not. Do you want to be there?"

Lyle hesitated, then said, "No. But if you could take note of your reaction to it to tell me tomorrow I'd appreciate that."

Lyle bought Mercy brunch the next morning; her only class was sculpture, late afternoon. They both got loaded waffles. Mercy looked pensive.

"Are you all right?" Lyle asked her. "Did the conversation not go well...?"

"Oh - I didn't even get around to asking your question, I'm sorry," said Mercy. "It's - I called, and it turned out they were going to call me after they expected me out of Sim Eng, and - Mother's sick. She's going to silicize."

Lyle nodded slowly. "That would be distracting. Yeah."

"And since you'll probably ask, Conceptual Christianity is *entirely* positive on silicization. Words and deeds and fellowship and all still exist if you go from flesh to pattern. Mother didn't grow up Conceptual, though. Her mother's still alive - and *decrepit*, it hurts to look at poor Nana, I think she's starting to consider changing her mind but who knows if she will before - but anyway my mother's father actually *died*. Less than ten years ago! Ceased to exist, and not in a freak accident, either, he just turned away the uploaders and *died*. And I think Mother has residual hangups about going in silico, from her childhood? Even though she converted when my parents got married."

"She's nervous?"

"She's got a lot of very complicated feelings, I imagine, she didn't dump them all on me. It's going to be so different. Father might go with her, they were talking about how I'm almost twenty and don't really need them physically around anymore, there was a terrible joke about how she'd leave me all her recipes..."

"You're old enough to silicize too, if you wanted," said Lyle. "It'd be early, but it wouldn't wreck your brain growth."

"I know, but I might want children, one day. And it's not as though I go visit my parents too often from here regardless." She shrugged. "They'll probably rent one of those silly looking robots and decorate it with seashells and come bother me all the time. I'm just worried that Mother's worried."

Lyle nodded and poked his waffle with his fork. "I'll understand if you don't want to ask them."

"I don't have to ask them. With Mother on her way to silicizing and Father on the fence I'm expecting a little alert any moment now about being in charge of my own med-" There was a beep; Mercy consulted her pocket computer. "Yep, there it is. I'll just look it up now."

"Mercy -"

"Mercy Long," Mercy said, "nineteen, female, B-positive... here we are. Tweaked in utero for - this is all minor spellchecking -"

" *Mercy* -"

"Almost found it. Tweaking indicated principally because of prenatal profile indicating high likelihood of child being -" She blinked. "Transgender. Huh. I was expecting something more... I don't know."

"Well. They do tweak for that if the parents want to," Lyle said.

"I never did look at a complete list of tweaking parameters. The wording doesn't quite say what they *did* , where I started out. Did the tweak make me a *girl* or make me *female* , I wonder?"

Lyle didn't answer; she poked at her pocket computer. Eventually she shrugged and put it away. "Anyway, there's your answer."

"Think it was a good idea?" Lyle asked.

"Both I and Conceptual Christianity are in total agreement that trans people deserve full recognition as the genders of their souls and that their essential humanity should not be infringed upon in thought, word, or deed. That having been said, I don't see why anyone would decide to be trans if they could change it that easily and that far in advance," says Mercy. "It sounds - I don't know quite what I want to say - complicated? Exhausting? If you could have childhoods in silico I suppose it would be comparatively trivial to deal with, if pointless to include, but you *can't*. My cousin's wife has a prematurely silicized... aunt, I think... who got very sick when she was four, and they - I've talked to her a little, and it just - But that's beside the point. Yes, I suppose I think it was a good idea."

Lyle stole a half-strawberry off her waffle. Mercy rolled her eyes and let him.

"I thought you were going to sit with me in Sculpture," Mercy said, when Lyle turned up at her dorm suite that evening.

"Sorry," Lyle said.

"You don't have to apologize to *me*, you're the one with a final project on Conceptual Christianity to turn in. Not that I don't enjoy your company."

Lyle smiled a little, at that. "Hey - Mercy?"

"Mm?" she asked, waving him in and shutting the door behind him.

"Oh, hey, do you want some popcorn?"

"Yes please. I've got a weird question."

"Shoot."

"If somebody simmed *you*, and your sim thresholded, how would you feel about that?"

She started the popcorn going and thumped onto the couch next to him. "Are you asking me theologically or personally?"

"Whichever, both - in sum, I guess."

"Conceptual Christianity holds that subjectivity-bearing patterns are people, and moreover that they are the people they think they are to the same extent that flesh people are - so, sims are generally mistaken if they think they're Christ or Napoleon, we don't have the data to sim them, but a threshold pattern who thought she was Mercy Long would almost certainly be Mercy Long. She'd be a prematurely silicized version of me, so I guess she'd be put out about not being able to have kids without enormous hassle and we'd have to go through the amicable forking process instead of trying to juggle a single legal identity, but I don't envision having a philosophical crisis about it."

"And it would be the *amicable* forking process."

"Why would I want to invite the hostility rigmarole? Either of me? Bureaucrats and risk of asset seizure - not that I have that much, I guess it'll be more when my parents go - and restraining orders. Ugh. I'm not saying I'd give her input into when or with whom I eventually had the kids she couldn't, or even be especially generous with my allowance, but that doesn't mean we'd necessarily fight."

"Very - practical of you."

"I do think I'd be irritated with whoever simmed me without my permission. I'm a sim engineering *major*, I'd have wanted to look over their parameters."

Lyle nodded slowly.

"What are you going to wind up turning in, anyway?" Mercy asked.

"You keep bouncing topics all over the place and sometimes it seems

more like you're going to write a book about me than a thesis about my religion."

"The format is - it's - okay, I have no idea how to - Mercy, if somebody asked you how to help escort your sim into shared silicon and tell her what was going on what would you do?"

"God, Lyle, I'm not *qualified*. Don't they have people whose job that is? Who've majored in social work or something and run around handling threshold cases when they pop up, in between counseling the mentally ill and looking in on fosterage arrangements and so on?"

"Some," said Lyle, "but I don't think they know what they're doing either. She'd be you, more or less, what would you tell her?"

"I'd - I don't know! Hello, welcome to the world? Our parents always wanted a second child and will be so pleased that they have one once they've gotten over the shock? So tell me about your simulated environment? I can cover part of the rent on a robotic chassis to let you take classes with me if you want? Can I call you by our middle name instead?"

"Assume as part of the sim she had a different name already."

"Well, that would be convenient, at least, but if you start changing things around I start reaching for the social workers again, my expertise goes kaput."

"Yeah, I'm getting that." Lyle swallowed. And then he said, "Hello. Welcome to the world."

"You're not funny," Mercy said, getting up to retrieve the finished popcorn.

"I know," said Lyle. He didn't take any when she sat back down and offered him the bowl. "I never told you my last name."

"Lyle, it's not funny."

"I'd show you, but you're in the middle of a snack. And you might decide you want to slap me and I'd hate to deny you the chance."

"Lyle -" Mercy looked at her popcorn.

"Count them," murmured Lyle.

Mercy tried. Picked up one kernel at a time and looked at them collecting in her palm. One two five three six four -

One two four -

One two two *many* -

"Oh God," she breathed. "What did you do?"

Lyle bowed his head. "I'd say," he said, "that our parents always wanted a second child, but they really didn't."

Mercy flung her popcorn at the wall and sobbed.

"You're not an anthropology student."

They were in sim engineering classroom. It was empty. The equipment would present as broken if she tried to fire it up. Couldn't have the sim nesting. Mercy had considered it thematically appropriate.

"I'm a sim engineer like you. A couple years farther along."

"I'm your, what, thesis project?"

"You weren't supposed to threshold. I didn't do it on purpose. The professor rated it less than one in a hundred million likely."

"But I'm your thesis project."

"Yeah."

"You don't care about Conceptual Christianity at all."

"I used that excuse," said Lyle, "because that's - what I changed. In baseline reality, Father converted. Not Mother."

"God, no wonder you look like me. You probably looked *exactly* like me until you started taking hormones; is your sim presence optimized or do you look like that in the flesh?"

"I look like this," said Lyle. "When I'm wearing clothes and my skin's having a good week, anyway, if you want to get technical."

"I did not need to get technical," Mercy said. "Did you use to be named Mercy?"

"No. They didn't name me after a Conceptual reverend because they weren't Conceptual. I'd rather not tell you what they did call me. I'm Lyle now."

"Of course. I apologize," said Mercy automatically. "When did - when did I -?"

"If you think about it - paying attention like when you tried to count the popcorn - you'll be able to get a more precise guess than me," Lyle said. "But the threshold notification popped up during your ethics course yesterday. When you got angry."

"How long were you running me before I - before I thresholded? Just from when you asked me about shadowing me for your project? Did you do that the long way around, even, is that a simmed memory?"

"I gave you twenty minutes' lead time and then I showed up," murmured Lyle. "I was really there when you met me, it's not a simmed memory."

Mercy swallowed. "Why would the sim engines have been broken - why wouldn't there have been preschool or a bus to it the middle of a Monday -"

"Yeah. Can't sim children. If they thresholded -"

"Of course. Of course you can't."

"But you're fine. You're nineteen."

"Our parents didn't want another child?"

"They weren't," said Lyle, "very happy with their first one."

"Because you weren't tweaked, because they weren't Conceptual Christians -"

"Yeah. Basically."

Mercy kicked a sim engine, not hard. It didn't *really* make a noise. If she thought about it, all that there was, was the impression that she'd heard something.

"Is there someplace set up for me in proper silico?" she asked.

"What are - what am I looking at, here?"

"When you were in sculpture -"

" *Dreaming* I was in sculpture -"

"Yes. Sorry. I got the school to take a decent chunk of liability because the professor signed off on my parameters. You've got enough runway from that alone to cover standard-speed runtime and an environment - design your own or buy into a shared or get a

private off the shelf, whatever you like - you can rent a chassis and test into courses - maybe not sculpture, fine motor control, but, you know - and get a degree. It'll last even if you take a gap year or don't find work right away, and the hiring market for engineers is still good even though it's a couple years later than you thought it was. I'll probably find a job this fall and I'll help you if you need it."

"I wonder what the transition'll be like. Going from - dreamlike physics-cheating sim to proper silicon," murmured Mercy. "I barely notice if I don't pay attention..."

"It's not very different from coming out of a self-insert into baseline reality - I've heard," said Lyle.

"Which I, well, remember doing. Right." She sighed. "Any reason to wait? Besides the fact that I can't slap you through a display screen? I don't want to slap you."

"Uh, I'm glad you don't want to slap me. No, no real reason if you're ready."

Mercy swallowed.

"Do it."

Lyle hugged her, once, quick, hard, and then he disappeared, and then the world followed after him.

Muse

This story is also available in audio, which you may download as [MP3](#), [FLAC](#), or [OGG](#), oration by [Grognor](#).

Ananda decided that she wasn't going to tell anyone that the captain read her dramatic reentry-into-normal-space speech from notes taken on lace-bordered stationery.

"Today," Lata Kamdar intoned, aiming at the nearest audio pickup, "we reattain the stars. Today we reach our hands out to our neighbors, not to bid them goodbye before we scatter in a hundred directions, but to reconnect the broken graph of human colonization. Today we have carved a path from our home to our neighbors', and brought with us the tools to draw one back, so that before the month is out, it will be as easy to get from one planet to another as it is to travel between continents. Today we lay the foundation for a web of exploration and trade that will surpass all the glories of lost Earth."

"Today," muttered Hari, "if they're unfriendly we explode in orbit rather than let them find our families back home -"

"Shhh," said Ananda.

"Today," concluded the captain, "we begin to undo the Scatter." She switched off the microphone. "Randhawa, if you wrecked my recording with your commentary -"

"The mic didn't grab anything but you, Captain," promised Ananda.

"Good. We don't *expect* to have to explode in orbit. We expect to be greeted politely by people with even more incentive to form a

friendly relationship than *we* have. We're the ones with the boats."

"Captain Kamdar," said Ananda, "we're getting radio spillover."

"Brilliant," replied Kamdar. "Let's eavesdrop. Did you send our greeting broadcast?"

"If they're listening, they'll get it; I sent several repetitions," confirmed Ananda. "We'll be within chatting distance in a few hours, and then we can say something more substantive than *this is the crew of the Spindrift from the colony Satyameva Jayate on a peaceful contact-establishing mission* in forty dialects." And she drummed her fingers on her control screen and the ship's computer selected a stream of radio to share.

Music sighed into the bridge. It began mid-phrase but resolved into an ecstasy of orchestral harmony and then careened into a choral section, and everyone caught their breath.

No crewmember moved or spoke or coughed until the piece was over. The radio went on, in barely recognizable colonial-bottlenecked Greek, for a sentence before Ananda switched it off.

"Put it back," breathed the translator. "Put it back, I think it said there was another song next -"

"Belay that, Mehta," the captain told Ananda. "We'll be here all day with our mouths hanging open. Can we find a station with something more informative than the colony's excellent musical taste?"

Ananda flipped through the radio band, listening to snippets in her headset until she found something without any tune to it, and let it fill the bridge audio channel.

"Pradha," Kamdar prompted the translator. And when that didn't get his attention: " *Dev* ."

"Yes, Captain, sorry, Captain," said Dev, and he listened, and typed. His control panel was textured; it made a clicking sound against his nails when he reached for certain letters. Ananda got up to peer over his shoulder as he translated: *celestial holiday (?) feast and sculpture festival (?) this concludes (?) cultural event news rain in (?) province this (span?) warming under less cloud cover (?)...*

While Dev worked on that, and Jyoti went to fix everybody lunch, and Hari performed a nav check to make sure they'd approach the colony at the right angle, Ananda got the computer cataloguing the rest of the radio band as best as it could. She might want to listen to more of the local music later during her downtime.

The *Spindrift* swung within chatting distance of the colony. It had been designated with a number when it was settled during Scatter, but the crew had been trying to avoid using it, presuming that the colonists of this planet - like those of their own - would have renamed it in short order. Ananda prodded her control panel until she managed to raise somebody who'd talk back, then kicked them over to Dev, who'd been working on picking up the colonial Greek. Nobody shot at them. They were invited to land on the planet (which was named Muse). It was a good day, Ananda thought, the best possible reception they could have hoped for. Muse had not yet reattained spaceflight but was only too delighted to receive neighbors who had.

Dev shadowed the captain when they landed, muddling through Greek that had spent hundreds of years on Muse evolving away from the original and that he'd had to study from books that themselves had been translated a few times to keep up with Satyameva Jayate's own linguistic slide. He introduced the crew to the Muse colonists; Captain Kamdar shook hands with Muse's governor, and, through Dev, complimented the music they'd picked up. The governor said something about how if they liked *that* they should come to a *live* concert.

Ananda hung back, mostly; she wasn't a diplomat and her Greek was negligible. She'd gotten on this expedition for other skills, with some help from extensive networking. She'd taken the job to say she'd been there, to be listed fourth or fifth when someone wrote textbooks about Reestablishment or whatever they wound up calling colonies getting back in touch after Scatter.

But she was as excited as everyone else for the concert. Parvati, just waking up for her overnight shift, volunteered to stay behind on the ship, claiming not to like music. (Jyoti tried to convince her; she was unmoved by the statement that it was *really good* music.)

It was spectacular. If it made any sense to describe a concert as orgasmic, it was orgasmic. The natives in attendance seemed less impressed; Ananda, looking around during intermission, thought she had seen more enraptured ticketholders when she took her nephew to a children's theater production with last-minute props and primary-school-quality writing. The only thing that could distract *her* from the movements of the sound was the architecture. Everything was beautiful; the armrests of the chairs were carved, each one different, and the arches of the music hall swooped with achingly perfect curves, and there was statuary tucked everywhere with room. She'd closed her eyes when they'd boarded the train to go to the show, fearing motion sickness, but now regretted it - she must have missed dozens of buildings and maybe some of them were this beautiful.

She let herself get sick, when they went with the governor back to a local hotel to spend the local night (none of the Satyameva Jayate visitors were tired, but they were trying to adjust to daylight in the time zone where they'd landed). It looked like the entire planet was a museum, or at least the whole capital city. The colors alone threatened to seduce her into learning Greek and staying forever and having her wife sent after her. Tara would like the place, Ananda thought. Tara liked lovely things.

The hotel rooms had murals on the walls and dizzy beauty latch-hooked into the carpets and frosted flowers on the window glass and Ananda was afraid to touch anything.

She slept, eventually, embroidery scratching her skin.

The crew of the *Spindrift* were united in their fascination with the artistic output of Muse. Muse was keen on the gifts they'd brought, likewise; so the governor toted them to landmarks and galleries and gardens and ballets that brought Ananda at least to tears, and Dev did his best to translate the scientific papers on propulsion and other technical offerings for the governor's entourage of interested parties. Dev had brushed up particularly on his technical vocabulary for exactly this reason.

The members of the party who couldn't understand even half a conversation in Muse Greek could not participate. So they had to occupy themselves shuffling around looking at the art, moving hither and thither in tourist-mode, and this was no hardship. Every public place had music playing. Even the conversations of the passers-by were pretty; Dev's Greek halted and croaked slowly from his lips but the natives just about sang it, fluttering their hands, closing their eyes as though to more clearly see whatever it was they were trying to describe to one another. Nobody looked at the visitors for more than a moment; Ananda had expected space visitors to be very interesting, and instead there was unbroken politeness and personal space.

"I feel like I'm on a movie set," Ananda told Jyoti, when they were ahead of the rest of the party at a hall of sculptures. "Even just walking down the street. It's *inorganically* gorgeous."

"Have you noticed how abstract it is?" Jyoti asked. "I've seen a handful of portraits, landscapes, but mostly they seem to pull pretty out of thin air and skip turning it into a shape you'd recognize."

Ananda hadn't actually noticed that. "Now that you mention it. But they're all wearing makeup, they acknowledge beauty in the human form."

"Not all of them, some of them seem to do veils instead."

"I don't think Dev wants to waste his time asking how to say *who does your eyeshadow* in Muse Greek, though."

"Fair. I'm so glad they're a colony of friendly artists. I was scared they'd be armed to the teeth and mad about something and we'd have to blow ourselves up just to prevent them from taking the *Spindrift* and finding Satyameva Jayate. Instead we get to take pictures and - oh *Ananda* look at the *shoes* on that man -"

They admired his shoes until he'd gone by, and then Ananda picked up: "I wasn't worried, really. I knew it was in the mission parameters, but it's an edge case. I'd go on another one of these, even, when we come back crowing about our success and build another dozen ships to find more neighbors. If they don't come to us first."

"I hope nobody comes to us. Even odds they'd be invaders. I'd rather be in the middle of a lot of spokes we put down ourselves."

"Fair enough."

The party caught up, and Dev expressed that a museum docent had told him that they shouldn't talk over the music if they could possibly avoid it please, and they moved on to look at more of the marble and wood and glass.

It was a week into their visit before anyone thought it was worth making Dev figure out how to ask about the history of the colony. It was small, much less populated even after two centuries to establish itself than was Satyameva Jayate, and while they'd gotten

infrastructure like trains and plumbing set up, they seemed to be so heavily focused on art that Captain Kamdar figured there had to be some cultural reason.

The Muse colonists - Ananda had yet to think of a better demonym than "Musicians", and this was not fair, since some of them were painters or landscapers or something else instead, in addition to it being an awful pun - had a very limited understanding of their own colonial history, it turned out.

Satyameva Jayate had had its own psychological problems when its colonists landed and it began to sink in that they could not get off their new rock, could not with current technology get in touch with anyone else. But on Muse...

"I can't decide if I'm depressed or inspired," Hari remarked later, when they were all crowded in the captain's hotel room with room service (prettily plated and garnished on patterned china).

"How do you get the colonial psych mix *so wrong*," said the captain, "that half the people who land commit suicide in the first six months? Dev, are you positive you got that right?"

"Positive," said Dev. "They don't know and neither do I how the colonists were picked - maybe people bribed their way on, maybe there were stowaways, nobody was trying to write historical primary sources when they had twice as much work as expected getting the farms going and building houses and burying the dead. Which couldn't have helped in itself, either."

"If half the people who'd landed on Satyameva Jayate had killed themselves," said Ananda, "I don't know that we'd have managed to establish a colony at all instead of - starving, handling the equipment wrong -"

"There was mishandled equipment - if everybody who knows how to use this or that terraforming item offs themselves, somebody has to

try anyway, apparently a lot of people wound up blinding themselves or neglecting their hearing protection," said Dev. "The governor's aide was very awkward when she explained that." (Everyone glanced at Dev. Dev, of course, didn't notice.)

"But they've done beautifully," said Kamdar.

"Literally," said Jyoti, and that got a laugh.

"Maybe the survivors included a critical mass of artists, and now they're just really inbred," suggested Hari.

"It could be my Greek," said Dev, "but I don't get the impression that they think they're talented at all. Even the professional artists, let alone the hobbyists."

"The governor was doodling while we talked about what to name the supraspace path between here and Satyameva Jayate," said Kamdar, "and he was about to throw it away, and he laughed at me when I asked if I could keep it. He let me, though." She unrolled the drawing and showed it off.

"I guess we're going to be exporting strictly non-creative work," said Ananda.

"Don't let Parvati hear you calling tech stuff non-creative," advised Jyoti.

"What's the path going to be called? When it's carved in both ways?" asked Hari.

"Litha. Muse Greek for 'truth' - their language, our planet's name," Dev replied.

The *Spindrifft* was expected to turn around after spending no more than three weeks at their destination, and Ananda missed Tara

something fierce by the time Kamdar ordered them all to pack up to go. There would be more trips - for that matter, Muse now had the plans for a ship of their own in the same model, if they could divert enough attention to mining and manufacture. The next order of business was to get home, get plenty of Muse Greek into the hands of linguists other than Dev so they could parallelize, and report success.

The governor gave them all a little local spending money for souvenirs and Ananda bought a glass desk ornament, champagne-gold with ribbons of blue writhing inside it. She had the impression that the governor thought her choice (all their choices) tacky, but she didn't care, the desk ornament was just about the prettiest thing she'd seen that she could pick up unless she counted Tara.

The trip was going to take fifteen days in supranormal space, and except for Hari and Parvati making their regular round-the-clock checks of all the systems, there wasn't going to be much to do. Ananda fiddled with their recordings of Muse songs until she could get the formats to translate, and reasonable-quality versions floated through the cramped ship corridors and into their rooms. Parvati confessed that it was, indeed, lovely music, as music went.

Ananda didn't notice anything wrong until they'd been in supraspace for two days and she found the captain borrowing Dev's camera vest, with the grid of buzzers that let him "see" where obstacles were.

"It doesn't fit you," she told Kamdar.

"I know," the captain replied. "I'm just getting a feel for how long it'd take to get used to it. Dev doesn't mind, he's napping."

"Is there something wrong with your eyes...?"

"Medically? No."

"If your eye color was bothering you I'd think you'd get contacts or dye, not borrow Dev's vest."

"No, not that either. Not that mud brown is anything to be particularly pleased with," snorted Kamdar.

"Brown is a perfectly nice eye color, Captain. My wife's got brown eyes," Ananda said. "So have I. So have most people."

The captain shrugged and took off Dev's vest and put it back where he left it when he was sleeping.

And Ananda let it go.

She worked on Muse Greek, because they had the materials to make that feasible, and when she took a break, she looked at her desk ornament, following the ribbons of blue with her gaze.

There was a twist in one of them that she didn't like, on reflection. It had seemed perfect when she'd picked it out.

She went back to studying.

The next ship-morning, when she picked up her textbook again, she fiddled with the settings on her screen until she'd found a font that didn't make the Greek letters look like - like segments of bugs, scrabbling around in millipede-rows. There was one that was tolerable. She suspected it wouldn't have come up if she wasn't starting to see the letters as text more than arcane symbols. Probably a sign of progress.

Jyoti didn't have lunch ready when Ananda went to the ship kitchen. "Is Jyoti sick?" she asked Hari, who had brought his screen into the dining nook with him.

"Don't know," Hari said, distracted, around a mouthful of rice. "We haven't talked. There's extra from yesterday and some ready-made."

Ananda mounded rice and chicken and sauce on a white plate - who'd picked these dishes, she wondered, would it have killed them to put a design in the plastic? - and heated it up. "What are you doing?" she asked, peering at Hari's screen. "Is that a painting?"

Hari's hand twitched, leaving smears of ochre on the screen, and he gestured to undo the mistake. "Don't look. It's not done."

"Feeling inspired?"

"I used to paint, in school, a little. I wasn't very good." He drew more careful ochre lines, then undid it again, went into the color picker, switched to a less saturated and browner shade. "Thought I'd try to get to 'decent'..."

Ananda's lunch was hot; she took it out. She rummaged in the spice rack - Jyoti would scold her, but Jyoti wasn't there - and found something, she didn't know enough about spices to say what exactly, that looked nice sprinkled on the pale orange sauce. She shook a little on, then poured some into her hand so she could pinch it into place more exactly. Almost symmetrical, not quite. She neglected to put the herb jar away and sat down where she could see Hari's screen and ate.

"I said don't look."

"What do you want me to look at? There's nothing to look at."

"It's not done! I'm crap at this, stop watching me!"

Dev came in - he had his vest on; Captain Kamdar wasn't still borrowing it. "What are you yelling at each other about? If you've got to shout can't you at least turn the music up, Ananda?"

"Oh, good idea," Ananda said. "I'll do that. One second." She bolted down her rice and flung the plate into the washer and went to fuss with the volume. The music swelled.

She didn't like this song as much as she'd liked the last one.

Let alone the first one.

But it was better than yelling; so she didn't bother Hari again. She was bored. There was something wrong with her Greek font.

She missed Tara. Tara she could stare at for hours, if Tara wouldn't giggle and push her face away.

Jyoti didn't fix dinner either. The captain went looking.

Jyoti was dead.

There was a note. Jyoti had found a calligraphy program buried in the screen software and left a note that almost didn't hurt to look at, until they actually read it.

It *rhymed* .

There was something wrong something wrong something *wrong* , with the colors and that little burr in the high register of their audio and the bleak deserted expanse of space of the walls the floor the ceiling the air -

And Jyoti couldn't take it -

And realizing it didn't help.

"Parvati didn't get out of the ship," Ananda heard herself saying, and her voice was ugly, why hadn't she taken choir when she'd had the chance to smooth away the twang? But she couldn't find the calligraphy program and write it out pretty if she wanted Dev to know what she was saying.

"Go wake her up," murmured the captain.

"If it's an infection," said Hari.

"She's already exposed. She overlaps her dinner with our breakfast," said Kamdar, "but if it's something else, if it was in the food or - or something - then - Mehta, go wake her up."

Ananda went. She detoured to turn the music louder. Why didn't she bring any pictures of her *wife* -? She navigated to Parvati's room with her eyes closed and hated the half-visible sparks that clouded her vision as afterimages.

"Parvati." What a name. Who gave their child a name like that? It was so full of - of *sounds* .

"Ananda? What?"

Ananda hated her own name too. Ananda hated everybody's name. "Jyoti committed suicide," she forced herself to say.

Parvati opened the door. On Muse doors glided open silently. This door - did not. " *What* ?"

"Don't make me repeat myself." Ananda's eyes were still scrunched shut.

"Jyoti is *dead* ? Why the - is there a note?"

Ananda nodded.

"Ananda, what's wrong?"

"We." Ananda swallowed. "We may have caught something, on the planet. Do you have it yet? Is there anything - anything beautiful, on this entire ship -?" The answer was no. There was nothing. Her desk ornament was probably as good as it got and Ananda kind of wanted to smash it.

"Math," said Parvati. "I was doing math when you interrupted me. Are you delirious?"

"No. No, it's only." It was too hard to explain out loud; raising her voice to be heard over the music was worse - and Dev wasn't there. "Let me borrow your screen."

Ananda had to open her eyes to do it, but she found the calligraphy software and when she typed the letters swooped into place, forming acceptable ligatures and decorated descenders. She had no talent for poetry; she did not make it rhyme.

We're all in a bad way. Everything's painfully ugly, that's why we have the imported music turned up so high, it drowns it out a little. Hari's trying to paint and I think the captain wants to put her eyes out and Jyoti's dead and I don't know what Dev's doing, yet, it might be that he's fine because he can't see to begin with, but I don't know that any of us are going to be much help with getting home.

"I can fly the ship myself if I have to," said Parvati. "The question is do we *go* home, if there's an infection aboard. We might have to quarantine ourselves."

"Oh stop talking," breathed Ananda.

"This is *important*," said Parvati. "Half the Muse colonists lived, right? Initial batch, no selection for resistance to the pathogen, half of them lived and established a civilization. A very, very arty civilization -"

"We could turn around," said Ananda suddenly. "We could turn around and we could stay there and everything's almost tolerable, there -"

"We need to finish carving the path so nobody thinks we met an army on the far end and panics," said Parvati. "And then we report in, or I do anyway -"

"You might have it."

"Oh," said Parvati ruefully, "I *definitely* have it. This puts all the math I've been doing in perspective. But I'm in the surviving half, all right? I'm - channeling it. And we tell them what happened from a safe distance, and then we can turn around and live in an art museum and tell them they're all *infected* so they don't let anyone else land."

"My wife," said Ananda.

"What about your wife?"

"I need to see her. She's beautiful and it feels like there's nothing beautiful and I *need* -"

"We can get some pictures or video or whatever you need bounced up without exposing her or anybody else to whatever the hell we've got," said Parvati.

"I can see the pixels, on the screens," breathed Ananda. "It's not going to be enough."

"You can't see the pixels, I promise you can't, not really. We will get you very high-resolution photos of your wife and in a few weeks you'll be back on Muse surrounded by acceptably pretty things, all right?"

"We thought they were artists," said Ananda. "They're - it's barely a coat of paint -"

"I know," murmured Parvati. "I have it too. I know."

Parvati steered Ananda back to her cabin and Ananda sat there, staring fixedly at her kitschy, pathetic desk ornament, until she managed to sleep.

On the eighth day the captain blinded herself.

It wasn't a surprise. She'd been going with a blindfold on, borrowing Dev's vest, teaching herself Braille at his control panel. Parvati had made a token attempt to supervise her and forestall the outcome but simply couldn't be everywhere at once. Parvati was barely getting the ship function checks done when she needed to be proving lemmas or whatever she was up to when she sought to satisfy the bottomless aesthetic need. Hari couldn't help her, he was completely wrapped up in trying to get his paintings to come out right.

On the ninth day Dev told Ananda to turn the music off.

"What - no - I can't - Dev the ship makes *noises* we're all *breathing* I can't I can't -"

"Turn the music off," Dev said, "or I'm going the way Jyoti did, I have a song, I have a *good* song, it's better, I can make it good, but I have to have quiet to work -"

"There's no way to get it totally quiet, the ship noises -"

"Stop talking!" screamed Dev. "Turn the music off and I'll make us *better* music than this *rubbish* -"

"No no no -"

Dev slapped her and Ananda fell to the ground, sobbing, feeling even more disgusting, like a suppurating abscess on the skin of the world. "Turn. It. Off. Give me an hour. I need to write my song."

"Do it yourself."

"Your screen's completely flat and my vest doesn't have the resolution to read it. Turn the music off."

"Make Parvati do it."

"I can't distract her. She's spread thin making sure we don't disintegrate into supraspace and I don't want to die *unless you don't let me compose my song* - I can almost *taste* it, Ananda, it's perfect, it's better than anything we heard on the planet, it's going to be beautiful, really, really, beautiful, but I need quiet. Turn the music off."

"Beautiful?"

" Yes ," said Dev, and there was an awful longing in his face, when Ananda could stand to look at him long enough to read his expression.

"An hour," she said, and she turned the music off, and took the screen into her room with her and locked the door so the captain wouldn't be able to override her. If Dev thought he could make something really, truly beautiful -

Kamdar beat at her door, howling, but while her captaincy would have let her bypass the lock, it would require more finesse at navigating blind than the captain had managed to pick up so far. Ananda stayed safely ensconced, earplugs in, trying not to listen to the pounding on the wall or the buzz of the ship, staring at her grotesque, twisted ornament. There was no beauty. There was nothing worth looking at but she couldn't help but see and she was too afraid of pain to take the captain's way out.

Thank goodness there wasn't a mirror in her cabin.

How did Tara stand to look at her? Could she do her wife the unkindness of making her look at her *again* ? Maybe it would be better just to beg for the photos and a video letter and not try to do a two-way conference. Then Tara wouldn't have to look at her.

Ananda knew perfectly well that Tara didn't have *whatever it was* , would find Ananda probably about as pleasant to look at as she ever had. But with no music to set the pace of her thoughts she was descending into a spiral of revulsion and couldn't imagine that her wife would feel any differently. She looked at her hand. It was a mistake: she'd touched Tara with that hand and couldn't believe she'd performed such a blasphemous action. She could bite her nails off, if it weren't too disgusting to contemplate putting them in her mouth, but that would only make it worse. She didn't have anything in the room with her that would let her lop off offending parts sturdier than her nails: bad foresight. If she tried to leave before piping audio into the air again Kamdar would probably strangle her.

Her screen notified her that Dev had sent her something.

She opened up the file and flooded the ship with it.

It wasn't beautiful.

They were back on Muse-sourced music. Dev wouldn't come out of his room, but he'd kick the door if someone called for him; he wasn't dead. Yet.

Parvati was short on sleep. Ananda tried to help with a check but was driven to tears by the grotesque design of the diagnostic software and wound up costing more time than she'd saved. None of them were eating well. Ananda knew how to cook, and was ostensibly supposed to take over for Jyoti if Jyoti were indisposed. No one even bothered to ask her to try.

And then Ananda had the dream.

Dev must have had a dream like this, she thought. Dev must have dreamed music; Ananda dreamed *stars* . An architecture of exulting slow-motion supernovae, all placed just so with the precise vagueness of dreams. She swam among the points of sharp-prickled

perfect-colored heat which traveled in languid smooth curves, slid bright blurs across deep black infinite backdrop. She dreamed that Tara was there and that Ananda had *made* all the stars to show her and Tara loved them and they were both beautiful too and the stars were *right* .

Ananda woke up dehydrated from crying. If she could paint it - well, not paint, it had to be three dimensions. If she could three dimensionally model it. If she could make it real, just like the dream, then the whole thing would be worth it. All the pain and frustration and the hour of aching quiet for Dev's technically lacking composition -

...Dev had thought he could make something beautiful, too.

Ananda was probably kidding herself.

She gulped water. She cried more. She asked Hari if she could look at his painting and he snapped at her. She tried sketching out the configuration of the stars and it just wouldn't come out right.

When Captain Kamdar was fumbling her way through a meal, Ananda snuck into her quarters and found the doodle that the governor of Muse had made. It was trivial and badly-made and his hand had shaken and it was the loveliest thing in the room, just like Ananda's glass ornament.

Ananda waited until Hari left his screen unattended and looked at his painting. It was like Dev's song. Inspired incompetence.

The people of Muse were artists so that they could self-medicate without frustrating themselves into self-mutilation. Ananda wondered in a moment of near-lucidity how many children there found ways to kill themselves when they couldn't hold a paintbrush steady in primary school and despaired.

The stars were so beautiful and she couldn't make them, she didn't know how.

Ananda looked at their Muse Greek books. They were illegible to her; this was not a problem. She needed the illustrations. Music wept its inability to express its underlying revelation into her ears, but at least it covered worse noises. Pictures crept along the margins and inset themselves into the paragraphs of the books. Decently-composed, respectably color-corrected photographs illustrated concepts she was not yet able to read about. The Musicians knew what they were doing to the very limits of human technical ability. If she could live through the next few weeks - and she thought she could, if only she could see her wife - then she'd be able to live there. It wouldn't be lovely. It'd be tolerable.

They got closer to Satyameva Jayate.

Dev demanded another hour of quiet to try again. Ananda gave it to him. At least he knew how to start with nothing and end with music; she couldn't even do that for her dreamed stars.

Her dreamed fractal jewels fraying light into ideally shattered color.

Her dreamed clouds of sunrise-pink smoke and flowers.

Her dreams, her dreams, her dreams.

Everyone slept more as the infection sank its teeth deeper into them. Parvati slept through checks, seeking infinite infinities and spectacular irrationals that promised to show her their ends; Ananda heard her muttering about them. The missed checks concealed no flaws. How fortunate.

They made it home.

By the time they got within chatting distance of their planet (had it always been that sick teal color? The desert on the continent Ananda had grown up on looked like a ragged scar - the clouds roiled in logicless eddies -) Hari was dead. He couldn't get the paintings to come out right. He was convinced he was never going to get the paintings to come out right. If the paintings could not come out right -

He didn't leave a note. Everyone knew what it felt like.

Ananda was in the best shape after Parvati. She still had her eyes and ears. She was alive. She could leave her room - she'd been leaving Dev plates of haphazardly assembled meals at irregular hours, outside his door. She could talk again, if she spoke softly, modulated her voice just so, it was hideous but not enough to make her want to rip out her own throat. (The Musicians had been so *polite* about their ugly, undecorated visitors and their scratchy despicable excuses for voices. Ananda wished they'd been rude.)

Parvati called in from orbit. She made their primary report. Ananda didn't even listen. She was only waiting for one thing.

Parvati waved her over.

And there was Tara, blinking at her from the screen.

There... was...

It *was* Tara. Tara, worried, upset, confused.

There was no deficit in Ananda's ability to recognize faces, per se. It *was* Tara.

Ananda looked at her wife.

Ananda reached for her eyes.

Water

This story has a sequel, [Mana](#).

I: Niomah

Niomah

She was pulling triple duty. The busgirl and the food runner were both out with what everybody was politely calling *headaches* and which Niomah preferred to think of as the condensed ball of emotion elicited by *they're the owner's pets and if they steal half the booze and then call in sick with hangovers nothing will happen to them, will it* . So she took orders and cleared napkins and glasses and baskets of half-eaten fried taro and she ferried to recipients *un* eaten baskets of fries and fresh drinks. She skipped her first break of the shift and flipped smoking banana fritters instead, when she ducked into the kitchen and found the cook necking with the dish-washer, because if the bananas burned someone was getting clobbered and it'd probably be Niomah. The other waitress would escape the misaimed cruelty; she wasn't the owner's pet, she was just paler and prettier and had options besides working at the Emerald Drop.

Niomah *took* her second break, at one in the morning, fruit be damned, not because she expected to be able to get away with sitting down but because she could no longer physically stand. If she'd had forethought she might have brought silverware to wrap in napkins, or a tub of new dishes to peel the labels off of, so she wouldn't be caught quite idling, but it didn't occur to her until she had her ass in a booth and getting up seemed about as doable as climbing the Crystal Mountain. Backwards.

She people-watched. A couple hours earlier the place had gone from restaurant to bar. If she'd ever taken theoretical magic she might know how the furniture and the lighting shifted of their own accord, but she wasn't even caught up on state-mandated general education. The last time someone had tried to test Niomah on the geography and language of her adopted country her father had

"corrected" the bureaucrat about her birthday, so she'd gotten another four months of nonexistent spare time to study before they had to move out of town or go sublegal. More sublegal than the fake birthday already made them.

Vocabulary she might have picked up just from being around native Gathru constantly, but they talked so fast, and on top of each other, like the spoken words were a badly-observed courtesy and they were in fact telepaths. Some of them might be. Maybe the boy in the corner was actually talking to someone, not just staring into space like he didn't know where he was because he actually didn't.

Maybe he was actually lost.

With five minutes of rest Niomah was able to contemplate standing up and finding out - if she was sweet to him she might get a tip out of it, that would be something, the other waitress wasn't paying enough attention to steal it out of her apron. But she didn't stand. She was entitled to half an hour - a full one, if she called it both of her day's breaks back-to-back and pretended she was Mainlander-pale and Mainlander-rich and Mainlander-accented and entitled to the words on her contract.

She decided to pretend. But she caught Lost Boy's eye and tilted her head. If he wanted directions to the bathroom or the exit or the other restaurant down the block she could do that. She wasn't *that* bad with weird Gath vowels and syntax, and she could draw him a map on the bit of paper towel left from somebody's fries that she'd missed in clearing this table.

The boy blinked at her and came over to her booth.

Sanuar

That poor waitress looked *exhausted* . Sanuar's allowance felt like a rock in his pocket. She looked Arnysh. Didn't they have a thing about

being offered money? He probably couldn't just offer her fifty balances because he thought she could use them. Could he? Wouldn't she think he'd mistaken her for a prostitute? Or was that the Behadze? (*Was she Arnysh...?*) But she was a waitress, uniform and all. Did fifty balances exceed plausible tipping range? He was so bad at this.

But he was still walking towards her.

"Hi," he said lamely.

"Hi," she replied. "You look lost." Arnysh accent, he'd been right the first time.

"Not really," said Sanuar. "My friends," he used the word for lack of a better one-syllable summary for *people I don't like who I hang out with in the absence of a better option because our parents know each other* , "are strung out on mana spots in your back alley, but it's cold out so I stepped in. I don't think I ought to go home, I should probably check on them in an hour or so. Just -" He shrugged.

"Oh," said the waitress. He *liked* the accent. "Tell me if it looks like they are dying when you look, there is a regular, he at the bar, has magic and can save them."

"I'll do that," said Sanuar. "You work here?" *Idiot. Of course she works here, she's probably been working here for twenty-four hours solid, she's wearing an apron -*

But she smiled, darkly, looking at the ceiling. "I take a break here. I will get up and work here again, soon, if my feet are still on my legs."

Sanuar laughed. He tried to read her nametag, but it was too dark.

"Niomah," she said, catching him looking. "Something to yell when you want drinks."

"Sanuar. Sorry for loitering and not ordering anything. I don't really -" He gestured vaguely.

"I might care, if owner, he ever paid me the -" She snapped her fingers.

"Commissions?" suggested Sanuar.

"Is that the word - but he does not, so I would rather if you order nothing, and I sit."

Sanuar grinned. "I can oblige. You're just sitting? Talking to lost boys?"

"Watching people. Deciding who is prettiest," said Niomah.

"And who's prettiest?" Sanuar regretted the question - what did he think she was going to say, *it's you, Sanuar?* - but she didn't take offense at this one either.

"Girl, she at the table with the bubble liqueur. Face belongs in *museum*," said Niomah emphatically.

"Are you sure that's a girl?" asked Sanuar.

Niomah squinted, then shrugged. "Face belongs in museum," she repeated. "Makeup, illusions, sit up in bed so beautiful every sunrise, I don't know, they have gods' luck at whatever, *look*."

"They're pretty," agreed Sanuar, "you're very good at deciding who's prettiest."

Niomah's smile flashed her teeth white in the dimness of the bar.

Ens

Ens shook whenever somebody looked at him. Any minute now one of the falsies would fall out of his shirt or it would turn out he'd missed a spot shaving or he'd have to go to the bathroom and his walk, voice, conspicuous choker necklace, would give him away. And then -

Well, nothing, probably, he'd slink out of the bar and change into the regular clothes in his purse and go home. But he wanted -

Well, that was the question, wasn't it. This had seemed like a marvelous idea the other day. Ens had imagined putting on girlhood like another garment. And... he felt like a boy in a dress. Which was an interesting change from feeling like a girl in a suit, but not right either. *Damn* it all, it wasn't like he had any other evenings free to try this, either, not for weeks, and what if after weeks he slipped out again and whatever fractured part of his mind had given him this idea in the first place decided to go on vacation again the minute he put on his sister's pearls?

There were a girl and a boy staring at him. Yes, this was clearly why he'd swiped jewelry, and lied about the prices of unrelated purchases long enough to save untracked money for a dress. Being tittered at in bars.

He swigged his bubble liqueur. It was okay. Heavier on the sugar than the kind served at home. Not nearly strong enough to take the edge off what Mother called "adolescent mood", but the last thing he needed was to stumble around attracting attention when he had to sneak back into the house past the night patroller without waking the butler or the housekeeper or the sister to whom he had to return the choker. So weak sugary (*girly*) drinks it was.

They were still looking at him, sneaking glances out of the corners of their eyes.

Well, if the next time his sister was out all night and he had a chance to take her jewelry he wanted to do this again - just in case - it might be useful to talk to some people he'd never see again and get feedback on just how ludicrously unfeminine he looked. Assuming they weren't telepaths they could only be going on his appearance, right, not the mess in his head?

He knocked back his liqueur and put the glass in a tub of dirty dishes on the next table, got up, tried to *sidle* towards smoky-eyed waitress and that boy who looked unfair amounts of tall even sitting down.

"Something you want to say to me?" he asked, pitching his voice as alto as he could, feminine without try-hard falsetto giving the game away.

The boy blushed, hard; if the girl did too it was impossible to see under the Arnysh brown in the bad light, and she didn't look embarrassed, anyway. "We are saying," she told him brazenly, "that you are prettiest in the whole bar."

Ens blushed.

"And are not sure," the girl went on - her nametag said *Niomah* - "if you are pretty girl or pretty boy. So, my father, he should be how angry at me for ungodly thoughts?"

"Ah," said *Ens*. He sat down, across from the two of them, suddenly dizzy. "...You know, I don't really know, myself."

"Very angry father," chuckled *Niomah*. "Very pretty *something* ."

"You're wearing girls' *clothes* ," the boy pointed out.

"Sometimes I want to," shrugged *Ens*. "...If I'm very lucky that'll coincide with when I can, one day."

Niomah tutted sympathetically. "You should be just so pretty in anything, I think."

The boy was looking between Niomah and Ens like he'd been unexpectedly teleported there from somewhere that made a lot more sense. "Uh," said Ens, trying to draw attention away from himself and his weird internal conflicts, "what's your name - and 'Niomah', am I pronouncing it right?"

"First try," congratulated Niomah.

"Sanuar," said the boy. "You?"

"Ens." Common enough name. Unisex, even. If he didn't give out his last he probably wouldn't be identified by random bar people. "Good to meet you."

Niomah

Niomah sat with the one and a half boys, the tall lost one and the pretty one with the museum face, until she noticed the other waitress giving her dirty looks. Then she hauled herself to her feet and slid around Sanuar out of the booth, and got back to work. She reminded Sanuar to check on his drugged friends, and he reported that they were all alive and seemed lucid enough to get home on their own. Ens asked her for another liqueur and she brought it and Sanuar paid for it, to Ens's adorable dismay. And then Sanuar pressed the rest of his pocketful of bills into Niomah's hand.

"Tab?" she asked.

"Tip," Sanuar blurted. "You look - tired."

Niomah grinned at him and ran her hand over his hair and pocketed the money. " *Thank you.*"

"Oh thank goodness - I thought it'd offend you or -" He watched her hand when she let it fall back to her side.

"Much too poor to be offended. And now I could buy *you* a drink." She probably shouldn't, she should probably just smile and flirt and not actually let the bills out of her possession on anything nonessential, but they were a windfall to begin with, and the bartender *would* actually give her the employee discount she was entitled to.

Sanuar giggled. "I - I don't really -"

"Grape juice," she said, patting his hair again. "Say yes?"

He nodded, all shy.

"Niomah," said Ens before she could go put the order in.

"Mm?"

"Are you thirsty?"

"Eh, I get water." Clean water. She hydrated as much as she could and filled up a jug before she went home every day to have something clean to cook rice in and for her family to drink. Her brother who worked at a bakery did the same thing.

"Can I buy you a drink, whatever you want?" Ens asked. "It'll be full circle. ...Triangle."

"You can buy me a coffee." She could use one, at this hour, with the long walk home still ahead of her.

"They have coffee here?" asked Sanuar.

"No," Niomah winked. "We close in an hour. Coffee cart down the block, open all night."

"All right," grinned Ens.

Niomah got Sanuar his grape juice. She cleared the stragglers' tables. She flirted with the one and a half boys. When one of Sanuar's friends wobbled in to ask where Sanuar was, was he okay, did he take his share of mana spots after all and wander into traffic, she said he was fine. She issued the kitchen closure announcement, and the last-call announcement, and petted Sanuar's hair again before he left, and Ens loitered waiting for her while she filled up on water and linked elbows with her in such a *gentlemanly* way and took her to the coffee cart and bought her a coffee.

"Come by again," she suggested, batting her eyes over her shoulder. Ens belonged in a museum. "I work every day."

"Maybe I will," Ens murmured.

"Oh, maybe, trying to keep me doing guesswork," laughed Niomah, and she went home, a coffee in her hand to drink half of and keep her on her feet until she got to her bed and forty-three balances in her pocket to get a new pair of work shoes and a few days' worth of rice for her family. The other half of the coffee she'd thin out with milk to get her *out* of bed in the morning. And maybe they'd come back and smile at her like she was the sort of person one really *smiled* at instead of leering or ignoring or bossing like she was voice-activated furniture.

When she got home all her brothers and sisters and her sister-in-law and her parents and her uncle and her grandfather were asleep. She put the bottom half of the coffee away for the morning, hid Sanuar's money in her shoe lest her lazy sister-in-law or badly behaved little brother find it and steal it before she could buy needful things, and waited in the dark in silence until her oldest sister woke up to go to work and yielded Niomah her place in the big bed. Niomah fell asleep as soon as her head touched the mattress.

Ens

Ens put the pearls back in his sister's jewelry box and tucked the dress in the back of the closet and wiped off the makeup (thank *all* the gods that Mother considered doing makeup for the stage players an acceptably "culturing" school-break activity to fill his time, he didn't have to hide the box, just pretend he brought it home leftover from a production and make sure half of it was wrong for his skin tone).

He went to bed.

He woke up after insufficient sleep and put on his normal clothes. They were okay, this occasion, though who knew how long that would last. He shaved and combed his hair. He ate breakfast, and had his dulcimer lesson, and his Ancient Gath after that, and lunch out and a matinee concert with his sister because her fiancé was busy at the Hall of Justice all day and couldn't escort her. By the time the sun set, Ens wanted the pearls back again, but she couldn't get them because her sister was home and would miss them, because she was expected at her mother's party, because, because.

Ens wished she could treat her brain like a spoiled child asking for dessert after having turned up their nose at a perfectly good slice of cake the previous night, but then again she didn't really know what to do with spoiled children *either* .

So she kept on the starchy handsome boy clothes and re-combed her hair. And when Mother said "You look tired," Ens said, "I know how to fix that with a little foundation just under the eyes, nobody'll notice and I'll look presentable at the party," and her mother nodded and she scampered upstairs and did that, *just* that, no eyeliner, no lipstick, no boxed glamer for her cheekbones, but it made her feel better. And made her look less tired. Mother said as much when she came back down.

The party was ostensibly to celebrate Ens's sister's fiancé's promotion to District Justicar, but like all of Mother's parties it was really about collecting a lot of old money and old power in one place and introducing bits of it to other bits of it. Occasionally small amounts of newer money and newer power snuck in, and Ens could tell from long years of exasperated practice evaluating outfits and carriage that this was such an occasion. There was the manager of the shipping concern, there was the cousin of that fellow who'd married the duke's daughter in a surprise upset. There was an actress, only moderately famous, who had got an invite through Ens herself, because she always sat good and still for her paint and asked how Ens was doing, and if the nice lady wanted to rub shoulders then - Ens being the child of the principal local landowner ought to do some good for *somebody*, ever. There was the Fourteenth Archmage in full formal uniform robes, recently promoted on sheer skill with no connections to speak of, and his family -

At the shoulder of the Fourteenth Archmage was Sanuar.

Oh, no, not here, Ens had gone all the way to that little bar because she didn't expect anyone to recognize her and trace her back to her daytime life, her family, her - self, in the suit, combed and neat instead of pretty and pearly.

But it was too late to pretend to be abruptly sick.

Sanuar looked at her, where she was wobbling up on the balcony. Sanuar smiled. Gods, he was tall, standing up.

Desperately, Ens held a finger to her lips. *Don't let on, please.*

Sanuar's smile dropped. He nodded, very subtly, broke eye contact, let his - father? uncle? grandfather? - the Archmage introduce him to Ens's parents.

Ens trotted down the stairs like she was supposed to, appearing at her mother's elbow just in time for the introductions to swing around

to, "And this is our son Ens. Ens, this is Archmage Vayar -" Other relatives of the Archmage were introduced, and finally - "his son, Sanuar Vayar."

Ens smiled on automatic. "It's lovely to meet you, Your Learned Eminence Archmage, distinguished Vayars," she said, resisting the urge to push from tenor to alto. "I hope the day finds you well."

"Ens," said Mother, "I think you and Sanuar are about the same age..." Which meant *keep him occupied while the grownups talk* . Ens was more than happy to do so; Sanuar wasn't spilling the beans right now and if he wanted bribery to keep it that way it was in Ens's best interest to find out sooner rather than later.

"Why don't I show you around the house?" Ens said, automatic smile still in place.

Sanuar ducked his head in an inexpert bow and followed Ens away from the knot of adults.

Sanuar

"So you're the Fourteenth Archmage's son," Ens said, levelly, stiffly, when they'd slipped into a hallway and could assume they would go unheard.

"Uh. Yes," said Sanuar.

"And you hang out at midscale bars babysitting druggie friends."

"I don't really - they're not my - my mother knows their parents," shrugged Sanuar. "I didn't have anything else to do. They're not *bad* , just..."

"Are you a mage too?" Ens asked.

"If I am it didn't kick in when I was little. They can test me for late-onset in a couple months," said Sanuar. "...I guess I don't have to ask what Lady Riawae's kid was doing at a midscale bar."

"You don't," said Ens. "...Please don't."

Sanuar blinked, surprised. "I'm not going to *tell* anybody."

"Oh." Ens relaxed, fractionally.

"Promise," Sanuar added. "Why would I do that?"

Ens shrugged.

"...You have a nice house," Sanuar went on, feeling terribly inane about it.

"It's all right. As houses go. Just..." Ens shrugged again and Sanuar wanted to hug him. Her. Whatever. "You're really not going to say anything?"

"Not a word," said Sanuar. "We can have just met. Nothing about the Emerald Drop or - or pearls or Niomah."

"You haven't seen her again, have you?" asked Ens.

"No. I thought I might go back tonight..." It wasn't like he had anything else to do with his suddenly quadrupled allowance. Feeling glad about Father's promotion seemed a little like trying to be grateful for suddenly sprouting wings that could in theory let one fly but in practice mostly made it difficult to sit in chairs and fit through doors.

"Oh."

"If - you wanted to - you're the one who -" Niomah had said Ens was the prettiest person in the bar, not Sanuar, Niomah had flirted with Ens more -

"No - go ahead," said Ens, shaking their head.

"Because she thought you were pretty and -"

"Go, ask her out, date her for three years, marry her, have a dozen children, you might as well if you like, you have freedom of movement and your parents aren't trying to betrothe you to somebody *appropriate*," said Ens, shaking their head. "It'll be cute. Invite me to the wedding -"

"That's - a little premature. A lot actually," said Sanuar. "And I thought she liked you more -"

"Very angry father," Ens replied, rolling their eyes.

"Only if her father found out. About the thing, I mean, he'd probably be fine with you being a Riawae, if he's got any sense."

"Are you trying to convince me to hit on the girl you like?" Ens asked.

"It'd be cute," mumbled Sanuar.

"I can't, though, I can't get out of the house."

"It looked to me like your mother wants *us* to be friends."

"...You're offering to *cover for me* hitting on the girl you like. Pretend we're going on an overnight skiing trip or something and *actually* go buy Niomah coffee and get her to crack jokes at us."

Sanuar squirmed. "I thought she liked you more. If I can go back and you can't - I don't know, if she said she liked me too I'd always wonder about what she'd have done if you'd been there again to compete."

There was a silence. Privately, Sanuar wondered if Ens could be convinced to doll up again for such an outing, and then it wouldn't

matter much even if Niomah laughed right in their faces. Maybe. Maybe *Ens* would laugh in his face if he noticed Sanuar thinking it.

"You want," said Ens, "to enact some theatrical plot in which a girl we have each met only once chooses dramatically between us -"

"If you don't like her -"

"I like her," muttered Ens.

"Then - well, what would you rather?" asked Sanuar helplessly.

Ens... shook their head, and shrugged, and said, "Let's pretend we're going skiing."

Niomah

Niomah slumped against the front wall to the Emerald Drop and wept until her eyes were swollen and her throat was raw and she'd cried herself thirsty.

She'd just bought new work shoes, too, with that nice boy's money, because her old ones secondhand from another waitress had a broken lace hole on the left and a hole worn through the sole in the right, and they were the shiny green leather the Emerald Drop required, she had no other use for green shoes, her thick brown boots were still good, she didn't need pretty shoes for anything else. She'd have to try to return them, probably for half their price, and stretch the money as far as it would go. And look for another job. Or give her father all of the money and jump off a bridge and then she wouldn't eat her family further into poverty during her job hunt. Finding the waitress job had taken a month and a half, and she hadn't had it long enough to think that the field of available work had changed since. Probably there was nothing.

Her sister-in-law would probably tell her to bring charges against the Emerald Drop for her last week of wages. And Niomah would say *me and what solicitor* and the sister-in-law would gape at her like a stunned cow and take a solid day to absorb the fact that she'd married into a family that didn't *have* a solicitor. The sister-in-law might be more useful if her parents were still alive, but if they were then Niomah's brother would have moved *out* , not moved his wife *in* -

Footsteps. Niomah should have chosen a more secluded place to have her breakdown. Unless she was driving business away from those criminals by making a scene on the doorstep, that might be good -

"Niomah?"

She looked up. Sanuar the lost boy and Ens the pretty museum-piece, she wasn't sure which had spoken her name. She didn't want them to see her so pathetic. She scrubbed at her eyes with the end of her sleeve.

"Oh, hello, fine morning. So nice to run into you again. Don't give those bastards your money," she advised hoarsely.

"What happened?" asked Sanuar.

"Fired me. Without my last week's balance."

"What - *why*?" Ens.

"Hiring a Mainlander boy. *Speaks Gath better* . Said I am *lazy* , but lazy Mainlander waitress still has job -"

"I -" said Sanuar. "I can get more -"

Niomah shook her head. "Is nice - *helped* - but drying out a boat that is only half a boat. Worked seventy hours a week, six balances

an hour, do you have that to give away? And, angry father, he wonder where money comes from, if he finds out, supposes you make confetti out of precious daughter's honor, so much more important than rice and water and heat -"

"And - no, I can't match that wage. Right," murmured Sanuar.

"They can't fire you because you're Arnysh," said Ens.

"Can. Did."

"I mean, if you took it to court -"

She laughed. "Sister-in-law will say same thing. Sister-in-law *also* Mainlander. Of course you say it."

"My father's looking for a housekeeper," blurted Sanuar.

Niomah looked up and blinked tears out of her eyes.

"I can't promise - I don't have hiring authority - but I don't think he actually knows what he's looking for and if I recommend somebody, if you go before he puts out the ad -"

"Where, when?" Niomah demanded.

"It's - east of here, thirty minutes walking, big stone house with a green roof. Now, if you like, he should be home for the next -"

Niomah lurched to her feet, dabbing away residual tears from her eyes. "Now. If your father will not steal my money or put his hand in my shirt -"

"Gods, no," said Sanuar, blanching. "...I don't *think* so. Do a lot of people...?"

She shrugged. "Some. Too many." She started walking east; Sanuar and Ens fanned out to either side of her like they were about to

break into synchronized dance step. " *You* put your hands wherever you like, lost boy, but not your father."

"I -" Sanuar blinked rapidly. It was cute. "I what?" Niomah managed to smile at him.

"Ens, don't you think Sanuar, he is very charming?" Niomah asked. This was more her element, this made her feel more like herself, like a human being. Human beings flirted, human beings embedded themselves in groups of other human beings who liked them. Human beings did not cry on the sidewalk because they were short a few hundred balances from where they needed to be because of racist managers. If she flirted and smiled and teased she could be a human being.

Ens coughed. "Uh."

"You are on a date today?" she wondered. "Were about to get two straws in a chocolate milk? Did not mean to make pass at your boyfriend, beautiful. Oops. Or your girlfriend, lost boy." She giggled, twirled.

"We're... not," said Ens.

"Aw. Would be cute." It would, too.

Sanuar coughed.

"Hmm?" smiled Niomah.

"We, uh," said Ens.

"We were wondering if you liked one of us, actually," said Sanuar.

"Oh, no," said Niomah, walking backwards to watch them flinch, then she went on, "much too greedy. *One* of you. Silly."

They looked at each other.

"Not so greedy as to never share," she smirked.

They blushed. Niomah grinned.

Ens

"This isn't an Arnysh thing, is it?" Ens said.

"Oh, no, *not* that," said Niomah. "Very much not. It is a Niomah thing. Oh, if Father knew *such* anger about the confetti honor."

"And - to make sure I understand you -"

"My Gath is not *so* bad, I think."

"No, no, your Gath is fine. But when you say you're too greedy -" Ens's head was spinning.

"Is *simple*," said Niomah. "You come here, wondering, does Niomah want to pick one or the other to put second straw in chocolate milk? And my answer is there is room for three straws. Why not?"

Sanuar started laughing, almost hysterically.

"Is it funny?" she asked, tossing her hair.

"It's," said Ens, and she didn't know what to say next. It will never work. It's fantastic. My parents would throw a fit, your parents would throw a fit, his parents would possibly throw fireballs from the palms of their hands. Sanuar doesn't like - whatever I am - probably - does he? -

"It's perfect," said Sanuar.

Ens wasn't expecting that.

"It is?" she asked.

"Why not? I can probably get Father to hire her - she'll be in my house - you can come to my house whenever you like, can't you? It works." Sanuar was shaking his head as though in disbelief of his own words.

"It *works*?"

"Why not, beautiful?" asked Niomah, still walking backwards ahead of Ens and Sanuar.

"Because - three - and I'm -"

"Yes, good question, what are you," says Niomah. "Would like to know what to say after *dear diary, turned seventeen...*" She was looking almost predatory.

"...I'm whatever makes you look at me like that." Like she wanted to shove Ens up against a wall and nibble on her until only Ens herself was left, no shell of Riawae and starch and expectations. "Happy birthday," she added.

"So, dear diary, turned seventeen, have boyfriend and priceless artwork, lovely," giggled Niomah. "Boyfriend, priceless artwork, housekeeping job, very good day."

"I can't *promise* the job," said Sanuar.

"Better chance than applying everything everywhere. Much faster, if it works," said Niomah.

"And I'm pretty sure he won't grope you," Sanuar nodded. "Just - if it doesn't work -"

"You try, I believe you will try," said Niomah. "Dear diary, boyfriend attempted to murder good mood while it was a small baby mood in a small baby mood cradle."

Ens giggled. "I like how you *talk* ."

"Good. Tell everyone my accent is *beautiful* ," says Niomah. "Start trend. Publish decree."

"More your turn of phrase than your accent," said Ens.

" *I* like the accent," chirped Sanuar.

"Dear diary, priceless artwork and boyfriend very charmingly complimenting."

And with that Ens couldn't but *kiss* her.

Sanuar

Three straws in one chocolate milk indeed. Sanuar felt more like he was in line for two different fairgrounds rides simultaneously than like someone had stolen his candy, like the way he would have expected if all he'd had to go on was contrived serial magazine stories and not a real three-straw situation. Although it would probably be unwise for him to kiss Ens while Ens looked boylike in public, and nearly as unwise for him to kiss Niomah on the same block right after Ens did it. *Still* . Soon they'd be at his house and Niomah could be interviewed and he could catch up with Ens and then Ens would eventually go home and Niomah would be housekeeping on a regular basis and he had express permission to put his hands wherever he liked -

Ens and Niomah broke apart, at length, gasping like they'd been underwater. They seemed to have the same instincts about what was and was not reasonable public behavior as far as lip contact was concerned, but Niomah looked sultrily at Sanuar over her shoulder while lacing fingers with Ens, and Ens -

Did *something* with their face, one moment the Riawae scion cut out of the masculine aristocrat's template and the next moment as much a girl as Niomah was, batting her eyelashes at him.

Sanuar swallowed and did his best to lead them the rest of the way to his house without walking funny.

It was a good walk. Niomah did most of the talking, but Ens seemed to have unfurled like a flower, and laughed and kept squeezing Niomah's hand and tapped Sanuar very familiarly on the shoulder when she wanted to point out a cloud shaped like a frigate. Sanuar got warm and took off his jacket and Ens swiped it, smirking, to somehow *magically* wear more like a girl borrowing from her boyfriend than like a young man dipping into a friend's wardrobe, *how did she do that* .

Niomah found a centibalance coin on the street, and complained of having no pockets with her apron left back at the Emerald Drop, and she put it into Sanuar's back pants pocket.

Eventually they reached the new Vayar household. Big stone house. Green roof. Freshly bought in a neighborhood designed by a hotshot architect with more budget than restraint, very appropriate for a newly promoted archmage and hopelessly impersonal for said archmage's son. Maybe Niomah would get a decorating budget and make it look like anyone lived there. Sanuar let them in.

"Ens, you can - park in my room, up on the third floor on the left it's the one with the window seat - Niomah, I'll go with you as far as introducing you to my father but he might want to talk to you alone."

Ens nodded and disappeared up the stairs, boy creeping back into their walk with every step beyond the threshold of the house.

Niomah schooled flirtatious features into seriousness. "Boyfriend business is dear diary, not dear Sanuar's father, yes?"

"Yes. Sorry. Uh, and he's Archmage Vayar."

"Archmage is - Eminence? Excellency?"

"Either actually, just stick a 'learned' in front of it, 'Your Learned Eminence' is I think the one he likes better. He might let you shorten it later."

"His Learned Eminence Archmage Vayar. Yes. What else?"

"...Let's pretend I met you through one of the mana spots friends? Uh, Ninden, if he asks."

"He does not know the mana spots friends himself?"

"He doesn't. It'll hold up."

"Okay," said Niomah.

"And... let's see if he's in his workroom."

Sanuar resisted the urge to hold her hand as he led her into the house.

Niomah

"Father," Sanuar said, "I found somebody who may suit for the housekeeper job. Friend of a friend."

Niomah supposed this was even true, if one inserted Ens between her and Sanuar. She curtsied. "Your Learned Eminence," she said, fighting her accent with every syllable. Sound native, even if she couldn't look it, sound like she wasn't sublegal amounts of educated.

Sanuar's father looked a lot like his son: tall, slender, strong-chinned, gray-eyed. He was in his formal mage robes, heavy dark indigo with

a white stole that had fourteen dots on one end of it. "Oh? What's her name? Qualifications?"

"Niomah Mihi, Your Learned Eminence," said Niomah. "I have been a waitress. Filling in for busgirl, sometimes." *The* busgirl. Or *a* busgirl? Was getting that wrong worse than having forgotten it altogether...?

"Availability? Expected wage?"

"Any time, Your Learned Eminence." And - name her actual floor price or try to ratchet up? She didn't know how much competition she had. And didn't want to sound like she was ignorant of the job market by getting too far from the figure he had in mind in *either* direction. She went with, "I have been earning six balances an hour plus tips." The tips threw in enough uncertainty. She hoped.

"Mm. Do you work pretty quickly?" asked the Archmage.

"Yes, Your Learned Eminence."

"Six hours a day, eleven an hour?"

Less than she'd been earning on a decent tip day at the Emerald Drop, but for fewer hours - if a longer commute - and less subject to randomized customer spite; she could pick up side shifts somewhere else, seasonal fruit-picking in summer with her brother maybe. Or let Sanuar give her his pocket money, poor lost boy didn't know what else to do with it. "Yes."

"And you can clean and tidy, do laundry, set up rooms for guests, and help the cook, possibly fill in for him if he takes days off...?"

Unless the cook took off on her first day of work or didn't want to teach her, presumably he could show her how to throw together adequate meals for the odd vacation day. She could probably even make something up if she were thrown into the kitchen unprepared, as long as rich Mainlanders still ate rice. "Yes."

"All right. Sanuar can show you where things are and introduce you to the cook," said His Learned Eminence, waving a hand. "Come in tomorrow morning, before breakfast time, and you can start then."

"Yes, Your Learned Eminence," said Niomah, curtsying again.

II: Ens

Ens

Ens drew eyeliner on the lead actor's face and was called a *talented young man* and wished she would die.

Two hours more. Two hours and I can go to Sanuar's. It always cheers me up -

Ens ate lunch with his family and thought about the dress in the back of his closet and wished he would die.

Just swallow the dessert and wait to be excused. Just wait. I always feel better when -

Ens got into the carriage and told the driver to take her to the Vayar house and wished it would overturn on the way and crack her skull in half.

Half an hour. Half an hour and I can put my head in Niomah's lap and Sanuar will pet me and I'll be -

The carriage stopped outside the house. Ens got out. She knocked on the door. Niomah answered, broom in hand, smiling when she saw who it was. "Ens! Come in come in - Sanuar's up in his room." The wink accompanying this pronouncement meant *and I will be too when I've finished sweeping* .

And Ens didn't - feel - any - better -

Niomah wouldn't hug her until she was squirreled away in Sanuar's suite where nobody would see. That was probably all. When Ens got as far as Sanuar's rooms -

But she got there, and Sanuar hugged her, and Sanuar asked her what was wrong, and Ens said, "I don't know," and Niomah turned up a little while later, and asked what had made her priceless artwork so sad, and Ens said, " *I don't know* -"

"Nothing *changed*?" Sanuar asked.

"It's all the same. Except usually I feel better here," said Ens, mumbling into his shirt.

"All the same," Niomah said. "Well, why not be sad about that, sameness, *your* sameness?" She scritchd her fingers through Ens's hair at the back of her neck. "Secret priceless artwork under a sheet, hiding, hiding, pretending to be all boy always. More reason than *me* ."

Sanuar and Ens both looked at her, then, and she wouldn't make eye contact.

"Niomah?" murmured Sanuar.

She shrugged. "Is nothing. *Nothing* . Have good job for solid month. Have boyfriend and priceless artwork. Have family. Passed language test! Nothing, *nothing* . Stupid. Teenage girl nonsense, sister says, goes away soon."

There was a silence, Ens leaning on Sanuar and Niomah petting her hair, until Sanuar said -

"Am I contagious?"

In the smallest, most trembling voice.

Ens lifted her head to look at him.

"You're -?"

"I don't know if I'd call it sad," amended Sanuar. "And who ever heard of moodiness being contagious anyway. And I've got less reason than *either* of you -"

"Tell," said Niomah.

"It's better when you're here," Sanuar said earnestly. "It is, really."

Ens swallowed, and said, "You can't be contagious. It can't be your fault - before I even met you - well, I thought dressing up would help, and instead I met you both and you helped -"

Sanuar kissed her forehead. "We aren't helping anymore?"

"It's not that. I'd rather be here than *there* . I just - keep remembering that I have to go back. Live in their house. Lie to them every day and watch them look at me *wrong* - even when they're right it's by accident."

"What are the odds?" wondered Sanuar bleakly.

"Very good odds," muttered Niomah. "You, I talked to you because you looked *lost* . Ens, talked to her because she trying to look *right* and came out so pretty, but she could only do it with strangers. Very good odds."

"Now what?" wondered Ens. "What does knowing get us?" And the others didn't have an answer for her.

Sanuar

After Niomah had to start walking home for the night, and Ens's carriage came to pick her up, Sanuar was left alone.

He wasn't, exactly, sad. He didn't know how to describe it, had failed utterly at explaining to his girlfriends.

Niomah called him "lost boy", sometimes, still. He was that. He was a lost boy, wandering around in a confusing dreamscape, tired with nowhere to lie down, bored with nothing to do. And when his girlfriends were around they distracted him. Sometimes he stalked Niomah through the house while she was working, just watching her wash dishes or dust knickknacks with inimitable Niomah flair, stealing kisses when she moved from one room to the next. Even though Ens was able to come over most days to pursue their parentally-approved *friendship* Sanuar wrote her long letters on the in-between days and the evenings, about everything and nothing - and posted them, too - to fill time. It was better than studying his astronomy or accidentally running into his father at the wrong moment and listening to a forbidding lecture about how he'd *better* turn up with mage potential when he had his retest. He was just spinning his wheels until the late-onset retest. If he had magic he'd have, well, at least a clear default option. If he didn't would his life be wheel-spinning *forever* -?

Having no significant responsibilities would have been very liberating, if there was anything he wanted to do with himself besides leech off Niomah's good humor and Ens's beautiful fleeting smiles when they were available, and stare at the ceiling when they were not.

And now he felt rather like he was probably responsible for wrecking both of them.

Why did they even tolerate him? Apparently after dating him for a month Ens was irretrievably miserable, and Niomah, too, sad for "no reason". Why didn't they just -?

Oh, right. Niomah needed a job - *needed* , not in the sense of finding it inconvenient not to have one but actually spending her week's pay, every week, on food for her family. And Ens needed somebody, anybody, who wouldn't tell her parents about the "her" thing, who she was authorized to visit.

Of course.

Sanuar didn't think he ought to break up with them. They did, actually, need those things. Ceasing to provide wouldn't make that go away. And if Niomah was right there how could he not try to make her laugh - if Ens was right there how could he not reach out and touch her? If they were going to be around he didn't think he knew how to stop from - empathically parasitizing them.

...His father would have made *very* sure that his null result on his early mage potential test wasn't a misprint. Sanuar was definitely not *actually* empathically parasitizing his girlfriends. Not that this technicality would make them any happier. For that matter, if he were doing it in the conventional way he could give back what he'd taken. Instead he didn't even seem to have it anymore. He was some kind of siphon attached to a sieve.

Gray gray gray.

Sanuar stared at the ceiling and waited for sleep.

Niomah

No reason. No reason.

Niomah went home, routing around a protest going on along her usual route (something about water quality, good for them, she hated having to haul water home from Sanuar's every day, so *heavy*), and helped her sister make dinner. They had enough to eat. They were all healthy, except for Grandfather's bad leg and her little brother's eye, and those were stable chronic issues, not things they needed to see mages about right away; they could save bit by bit. Except for her falsified birthday, which probably no one would ever discover, they were legally in the clear; another two years without missing any key requirements and they'd have full irrevocable residency. Her lost boy and her priceless artwork loved her and she

loved them and there was practically no risk that anybody was going to find out, when they all had ironclad excuses to be at Sanuar's house, in his room.

(Well, Sanuar's mother had seen him with his hand on Niomah's ass once, but she'd just tutted that he was growing up and might want to learn discretion - which might have outraged Niomah if his hand hadn't been exactly where she liked it, which fact Learned Lady Vayar did *not know* - but anyway it had apparently fallen into the disciplinary category of negligible boyish carelessness, not serious departure from parental authority. Niomah was not in trouble for *letting* him, either, for seducing the Learned Sanuar's Parents' son.)

So: no reason.

Her family ate rice and spicy goat and cherry compote. Niomah slept in the big chair in the sitting room; they'd had to shuffle sleeping schedules when her work hours changed. It was worse for her neck, slouching in something not designed to be slept on, but better for sleeping straight through the night, not being next to kicking sisters and snoring Mother. In spring, it was less stiflingly hot; she might mind more in the winter. All in all not such a problem, not *now*.

No reason at all to keep going back to the idea she'd had a month ago: *or I could jump off a bridge.*

She could go jump off a bridge and her priceless artwork would cry, her lost boy would cry, her family would cry *and* go hungry.

But Niomah could not help but notice that all her reasons were about people other than herself.

No reason to jump off a bridge. Several reasons not to, all of which were located outside of the would-be jumper.

She felt less and less human every time she woke up in the morning. Her usual cheats were wearing thin. She'd called herself *sad*, but

she didn't know the Gath for it. She didn't know the *Arnysh* for it. Her sister had said *teenage girl nonsense* . Like it was part of the life cycle: get your blood and grow six inches and feel like jumping off a bridge and then get married and have five babies.

Niomah wanted to believe her.

Niomah did not want to make her lost boy and her priceless artwork and her family cry. Possibly she could cause the first two to stop caring somehow, but the family would mourn the loss of the *money* no matter how beastly she was to them as a person, so.

And the bridge would still be there in a week.

She slumped into her chair and closed her eyes against the city lights filtering through the thin curtains, and she slept.

Ens

Ens got as far as holding her razor to the skin of her wrist before she managed to consciously wonder what in the *fuck* she was doing.

She pulled the blade away. She folded it back up. She looked at the unbroken skin of her arm.

The smart thing to do would be to get *rid* of the razor, at this point, dispose of it somewhere, simply not have anything sharp around. If there was nothing sharp, then even in moments of inattention she couldn't try to prune herself off her oblivious family tree.

If she got rid of the razor, she would grow a beard.

There were glamers in her makeup kit that would hide a fair amount of stubble. In last winter's production of *The Minstrel of Crystal Mountain* a secondary character needed to appear in the second act with a few days of growth he didn't have in the first, so Ens would

put the glamer on him before the lights came up every night and peel it off again at intermission, and so she *knew*, by feel, that the glamer wouldn't do texture. If she touched her face or just bent her chin enough, she'd feel the scratch. And this would only be tolerable about fifty percent of the time.

Lord Riawae had imagined he was teaching his son to shave, but it had been his subtle second daughter who'd paid rapt attention to the lesson.

So - keep the razor, try to keep herself under some *semblance* of *control* like a *sane* person -

Or last about three days before she snapped in the middle of dinner and picked up a carving knife from a meat platter, and tried to cut the stubble and her throat in front of everybody?

No contest.

The razor stayed where it was.

Niomah

She snapped awake. It was pitch dark. No one was supposed to be coming or going until near-dawn. Was somebody up to sneak a drink of water from the carefully rationed bottles, or -?

No. Whoever was making the noises was not also making an effort to be quiet. They were stomping. Not even the neighbors would be so rude.

Niomah unfolded stiffly from her chair. Some kind of inspection, maybe? She padded to the door, ready to answer it, cough up whatever bribe or fee or fine they wanted this time.

The door opened without her touching it, which meant either burglars or cops. Matching uniforms on the men behind the door meant cops, although possibly cops who aspired to burglary. They didn't seem like normal cop uniforms; possibly some kind of special force. Niomah curtsied without making further assessments. "Sirs -"

"On the ground!" one of them shouted, and she dropped to the floor, hands over her head, blackly terrified - if they didn't want money what did they want?

There were three of them, she counted feet. Had one of her brothers gotten caught shoplifting or -? What was going *on*? They weren't eager to tell her, at any rate. They stomped into the room with the big bed, woke up the entire family, went into the second room with the smaller bed that these days had her parents in it by day and her brother and sister-in-law by night. Her father would still be at work and her mother snuggled up in the big bed for the second half of her time spent sleeping - there she was, the cop had her by the hair, she hadn't gotten on the floor fast enough for him.

Once the entire family was awake and cowering the cops tore the apartment apart. Niomah had no idea what they were looking for. Was one of her sisters dealing mana spots? (And not sharing the money, if so -!) Had they found out, somehow, about her birthday?

Niomah's sister-in-law tried to talk to the cops. Niomah's sister-in-law was Mainlander, close enough to native, they didn't hit her for trying, but they didn't answer the questions she asked either. Not until they'd ripped open both mattresses and the chair, dumped the stack of sideways crates and all their contents out on the floor and kicked through them, stuck their gloved hands into the big sack of rice as though they'd store imaginary contraband in their food.

And when they'd been everywhere and touched everything and patted down everyone in their nightclothes and destroyed half the apartment, Niomah's sister-in-law could be heard:

"What are you *looking* for...?"

"You're all very lucky you didn't have weapons stored here," said one of the cops. "This neighborhood's on lockdown now. There's going to be a strict sunset curfew unless you have a signed work permit - if you're out and an officer asks who you are and where you're going you will respectfully answer -"

He went on like that, ignoring pleas from Niomah's oldest sister to *please slow down, repeat himself, she doesn't understand*. Niomah was going to have to translate, after they went, into Arnysh which her sister-in-law didn't speak, concepts which her little brother with the otherwise best Gath didn't know like *martial law* and *riots*. They were not cops at all, but soldiers, Gathru army squads so not technically invaders. Not on a national level. They were military amounts of afraid of this little Arnysh immigrant neighborhood, didn't say why, she didn't dare ask.

The soldiers eventually left to shake down the next family along, and on, and on, and Niomah stumbled through translating an explanation.

She didn't try to go back to sleep.

She left for work as soon as it got light, earlier than usual, eager to get out of the neighborhood. She had to tell a soldier on what seemed like every corner that her name was Niomah Mihi and she did housekeeping for His Learned Eminence Fourteenth Archmage Vayar, that she expected to be home before dark, that her home was at thus and such an address. Two of the soldiers who stopped her patted her down for weapons. They all insisted on pointing weapons *at* her. None fired - on her. She could hear yelling from the other side of one block -

Once she was past the bridge there were no soldiers, just normal streets, people going about their business.

She didn't even know what happened. She was too afraid to ask.

Sanuar

She looked like she'd been up all night. Like she'd had the last week of sleep frightened out of her.

"Niomah, what happened?" Sanuar asked, when she brought him a tray of breakfast at his desk in his room and then collapsed across the foot of his bed as though about to weep.

"Oh," she said in a ghost of her usual laughing voice. "I stole hard candy out of cook's dish. That happened. Kiss me, steal it back, lemon, I hate lemon, why did I take it -"

"Niomah." He handed her a tissue; she spat the lemon candy into it rather than wipe her eyes, looking sicker than a candy could possibly warrant.

"Soldiers. In family *home*, middle of night," she said, rolling over to look at the ceiling instead of at him. "Tear everything to bits and shout and point weapons everywhere and hands on all of us, don't like how one looked at oldest sister. Soldiers, soldiers, tried to leave this morning, tell them all where I work, they threaten to shoot me for *I* don't know what -"

"What - *why*?"

"Oh, lost boy. We are *Arnysh*."

Sanuar didn't like the hoarseness of the words. He ignored the breakfast tray, went to line up next to her on the bed and hold her. He had questions - what, did this happen every week, since they were always *Arnysh*? Oh gods, what if it *did*, what if she was actually being terrorized constantly and he'd done nothing about it and had no idea because she was so used to it that it only

sometimes showed in her *face* ? He didn't know how to ask that and *not* sound like he was completely unaware that being Arnys had sometimes had effects on Niomah's life. Maybe later he could ask Ens, see if Ens knew.

She went on, after a silence, snuggling into his shoulder. "Don't know why. Someone caught doing something. Someone *thinks* someone doing something. Don't know. Soldiers didn't say."

Sanuar hugged her. "Do you want me to - ask my parents, see if they know anything?"

Niomah hesitated, then said, "Yes. - And ask, can Niomah stay here, live-in housekeeper, room next to cook, maybe. In case."

"In case -" He didn't finish the question. In case her family were all targeted and she had nobody to go home to. In case it was too dangerous for her to walk to and from work through an occupied neighborhood. In case somebody took aim directly at his girlfriend and her concern *still* had to be how she was going to collect her balances because she *needed* them. "Yeah. I'll ask. Not for tonight, right?"

"Right. Only in case."

He didn't get up, until Niomah said, "Your breakfast, it will be cold," and then he kissed lemon flavor from her mouth and stood and looked at the bacon and eggs and taro.

"Did the cook feed you yet today?" he asked.

"No."

He got her to eat a few bites, but she didn't seem to have much appetite.

He didn't either.

Ens

There were protestors outside Ens's house. She couldn't read their signs from her window, or make out what they were saying, but there were a lot of them, and most of them looked dark enough to be Arnysh. Was Ens going to be strung up for making confetti of someone's daughter's honor...? (She hadn't, even! Yet! Quite! What counted as making confetti of someone's honor anyway? Someone should make confetti of Ens's honor, she wasn't doing anything with it...)

This was an awful lot of people to be concerned about Niomah's honor, though, and Ens didn't think she was planning on telling anyone about the slight honorific crumpling she had so enjoyed, and surely Sanuar was the more obvious target.

Ens went downstairs.

"Did the riffraff out there wake you?" asked her sister from the breakfast nook. "They've been hollering for almost an hour, now. They're obeying the security perimeter so far but I'm scared to go out."

"I don't think they woke me. What are they angry about?"

" I don't know. Aren't they always angry about something? Sooner or later one of them will do something out of line and they'll all get taken away. Mother's trying to get police on the scene but they're busy with another protest just like this one. Maybe more."

"That sounds like a little more than them always being angry about something," said Ens. "Thank you," she added to the cook, when he brought her breakfast.

"Of course, milord," said the cook, and, "It's the water in the ghetto."

"What's the water in the ghetto?" asked Ens's sister.

"What the protestors are angry about. The water quality in Arnysh neighborhoods," said the cook. "Milady."

Ens closed her eyes.

Ens opened his eyes.

"Do we *own* any of the land in the Arnysh ghetto?" he asked.

"Not much of it. Let alone anything to do with the water," said his sister. "Just a couple of apartment buildings with shops under them, I think. Don't ask *me* why they're bothering *us* . I couldn't *sleep* . Don't they have jobs?"

"Who should they be bothering?" asked Ens.

"Nobody?" suggested his sister. "Gods it's so early."

She was no help. Ens ate his breakfast as quickly as he could without getting a reprimand for his table manners and went looking for his mother.

Lady Riawae was looking disgustedly at her telegrammer. There were message slips in a heap on the desk for the maid to deal with later. "Hello, Ens," she said. "Did they wake you up too?"

"I'm sometimes up this early anyway. Look, who *does* handle the water in the Arnysh ghetto? If it's not us?"

"It's not us. Honestly, Ens, at this hour of the morning? I wouldn't be complaining if whoever it was had poisoned those people thoroughly enough to keep them out of our yard in the first place. Doesn't it rain? Can't they be bothered to walk a few blocks to get water from the fountain? Parasites." And she started tapping out another message to the police.

Ens wanted to go and see Niomah, ask *her*, but he didn't think he'd be able to go anywhere soon. He couldn't get the driver to take him past the throng and if he tried to walk the protestors might decide he'd make good target for their frustrations, and there were a lot of them. He went to a window closer to where they were clustered. Niomah wasn't *among* them, or he might have tried going out anyway. Probably she was already on her way to Sanuar's.

"Mother?"

"What is it, Ens?"

"Can I use the telegrammer when you're done? If I'm not going to be able to visit Sanuar today."

"Oh, of course. Here, you can have it now, the police aren't budging any further," sighed Lady Riawae, and she got up and swept away.

Ens consulted the code chart on the table and tapped out Sanuar's address. They had a telegrammer, he'd seen it. *This is Ens. Please give Sanuar the telegrammer.*

Sanuar

Niomah brought the telegrammer up to Sanuar. "Priceless artwork writing to you," she said. "Walked by mopping, saw. How does it work?"

Sanuar took it from her and peered at the message tape, then tore it off and put both it and the device on his desk. "You have to learn a code. There are more expensive ones that do written text but they only work if both people have them so they've not caught on - Ens's family might have one but we don't."

"You know the code?" asked Niomah, leaning her chin on his shoulder.

"Yeah. It's sort of tedious but not that complicated."
Taptaptaptaptaptap. *This is Sanuar. What is it?*

There was a delay, then more tape spooled out. *I may not be able to come over today. There are protestors outside my house. Are you alone?*

Taptaptap. *Niomah's here. Otherwise alone. Protestors?*

"What are you saying?" Niomah murmured.

"I said it was me and asked what it was - said you were here and no one else, asked about the protestors."

Ens's reply came: *Reportedly they're angry about the water quality in the Arnysh ghetto. Mother says we don't have anything to do with the water but I don't know who does.*

"Well, of course," said Niomah. "No one wants job of getting us water. Doesn't work at all, stinks, salty, always something. Who wants to fix it? No one. Not Lady Riawae, not anyone. That is why such fuss? About water?"

"I guess," said Sanuar. *Niomah says it's not clearly anyone's job. There's been trouble in her neighborhood from soldiers last night.* He told her what he was writing as he wrote it.

Delay, delay. *Is she okay?*

"I'm not hurt, priceless artwork," murmured Niomah. Sanuar tapped that out for her, appended *she says*, and added *But she was scared.*

Delay. *If the water's always a problem, why now?*

"I don't know," Niomah said.

I'm going to ask my parents, Sanuar tapped. *About that and about if she can switch to being a live-in housekeeper if she needs to.*

Look after her, Ens replied.

Niomah

Sanuar's Learned Parents did not know anything about the situation in the Arnysh ghetto except that it was "a travesty", when they returned home from the evening and Sanuar asked. They said they would have to think about letting Niomah live in their house. His Learned Eminence drew up a work permit for Niomah and signed it. When Sanuar saw how she clutched at it he got his father to make the paper *glow* so it would be properly unambiguous. Niomah pinned it to her sleeve so she'd be able to walk home and show it to the police without having to put her hands in her pockets. She snuck a kiss from Sanuar and walked out.

It was a hot night and the water she had on her back was heavy. She took showers at Sanuar's house every morning when she showed up melted in the eastern sunshine and then enjoyed a day in the mage-cooled house; but it was still just as long a walk back and while her family's apartment technically contained a shower it wouldn't improve the situation. (Once her brother's friend's house had burned down and the friend had stayed with them for a night and had tried to use it before anyone was awake and the rash took days to go away. Niomah was not sure if they were still friends.) Gross. Gross and frightened and tired. If she made a sudden movement when she reached the men at the corner would they make her abruptly less gross and frightened and tired or would they make it worse?

She reached the first checkpoint. It was dark; the soldiers had bright lights that hurt her eyes, but her permit glowed and they didn't need to swing them around to read it. They let her by, but not without one of them landing a swat on her rear that made her eyes sting.

Do not try to scratch his eyes out do not scream do not kick him in the balls do not cry do not do not do not just go just go just go -

She didn't manage not to cry, but she went on, their chuckles burning her ears.

The other checkpoints passed without comparable incident. She got home. Her mother almost cried when Niomah handed over the water. "Your brother was fired," she sobbed in Arnysh.

In context - oh, *damn*, the bakery job, the other way they got water. What were they supposed to do, send the half-blind little one to the fountain to stand in line and walk six blocks, twice a day -? The fired brother would have to look for new jobs and couldn't do it...

"It's okay, I'll carry more tomorrow, I can do it, Mama," Niomah said. If it came down to it Sanuar might get her some kind of cart to put jugs in and who cared if it was conspicuous favor from her boss's son. See what her father cared about Niomah's honor when the *soldiers* did what they liked anyway, see if he could resent her lost boy when his entire family was going thirsty.

Niomah's mother divided up the water so very very carefully and everyone had their share to drink (some put away for whenever they got home from work) and they had just enough left to make rice that was cooked with the syrupy peaches intended for dessert *in* it to stretch the liquid.

When Niomah's grandfather hobbled home from the liquor store where he worked, almost an hour late and his cane missing and a bruise on his cheek, *he* knew what all the fuss was about.

"A couple of our boys from two blocks over tried to break into the place where the plumbing all connects up," he said, eating his peachy rice. "And swap some pipes around. Show the rich people what we live with. But they got caught and the cops killed them both, didn't even arrest them, those boys are dead. Their friends and parents protested at the police station, one of them is dead too now, the rest arrested or beaten - it's gone from there."

Niomah's recently fired brother looked like he was probably going to find a protest to join too with his new free time that he ought to be using to find new work. She didn't like the look on the half-blind little one's face either. *They will get tired and find other things to do and leave us alone if we wait* she didn't say. *They will only stop when they are satisfied we are done stepping out of line. Wait and earn money and save it up and we can get out one day but -*

Niomah shivered. Such thoughts from someone who had wondered an hour earlier what it would take to get a soldier to murder her so it wouldn't be her *fault* . She stayed silent.

Ens

Sanuar, do you still have the telegrammer?

Pause. Pause. *Yes. Niomah's gone home, it's just me.*

We finally got a news dispatch here. They're not telling us everything, but I think a couple of Arnysh kids broke into the plumbing exchange. I don't know enough about plumbing to say if they could've even done anything - you'd think the problem with the ghetto water would be farther downstream than that - The telegrammer cut him off when Ens got that far and she had to start a new message. *but then they were caught and the cops thought they saw weapons, I'm not sure if they really did or if they were just tools or something, and killed them.*

That's awful.

Ens scowled at the telegrammer. It was not very thorough about communicating emotional tone. She'd have to fill in from knowing Sanuar. *Yeah. And now they're focused on making the Arnysh shut up and sit down instead of just fixing their water and apologizing about the kids like they would if it was anyone else.*

I think those exchanges don't need mage labor to do basic changes but that doesn't mean I know how.

Could you find out? Tell your father you want to do plumbing with magic if your test comes out positive next time?

Pause. Pause. Ens got up and paced until the telegrapher spit out more tape and then she threw herself back into the chair to read the reply.

Probably.

I know how to do makeup, Ens said. I could make us pass for Arnysh in bad enough light.

Why?

Ens's heart was stammering like a stage-frightened introductory schooler. *If we get caught* she tapped slowly, and she paused to look over her shoulder, making sure her parents and sister were not in evidence, *and we look native we just get sent home and nothing happens. Message break. Water doesn't get fixed, soldiers keep attacking Arnysh people, maybe Niomah.*

Pause.

Pause.

If we get caught and look Arnysh at first glance they murder a couple of rich Mainlander kids by accident and our parents get up and do something? Sanuar replied.

Yeah. We can leave Niomah all our stuff.

Pause.

Pause.

Pause.

Ens was a terrible person how had she even come up with this idea she was suggesting what amounted to the anemic version of a suicide pact she loved Sanuar and he shouldn't die but he shouldn't be sad either and he was sad sad *sad* at least Niomah would probably feel better if there was *running water in her home* and if the authorities would stop *hounding* her but Ens didn't know what to *do* for Sanuar besides -

Okay.

III: Sanuar

Sanuar

Sanuar studied plumbing.

"Water's not a particularly dignified specialty," his father had said, when asked.

"I'm late-onset - if I am at all -"

"If you are not a mage *at all* that will be the greatest disappointment of my entire -" Archmage Vayar shook his head. "Well, it's not likely, son, not with both parents -"

"I know. But I'm behind most mages, anyway, and water's easy, right? So I think I might want to take water as my specialty." Sanuar didn't actually have the first clue what he wanted to take as his specialty. He felt kind of bleah about all of them. Water *was* reputed to be easy, and he could pick up secondaries later. It wasn't like he was committing to giving up something he loved the idea of learning in order to get his hands on a book about plumbing.

Sanuar studied plumbing in between prepping for his second mage test. Not that it really required prepping. His mother seemed inclined to fuss about it.

"We've already found someone whose birthday is half a year from yours to orient your mana," she said.

"That's good," said Sanuar, because she didn't want him to say *if I even have any mana* .

"And it's the simplest thing, dear, I don't want you to worry a bit."

"I'm not," he said, because he wasn't. That would require a lot of emotional energy, probably. *She* was worried and he wished she'd stop.

"It's the simplest thing, you'll just go in and hold his hands - it's Ninden, I know you like Ninden."

Sanuar hadn't found himself obliged to hang out with Ninden in weeks. Ninden spent his time on manufacturing mana spots and giving them to all his friends so they'd like him, and occasionally enchanting furniture to maintain a certain level of genteel poverty since his mage mother's accident. "Mm."

"And Ninden won't even be doing a speck of magic, it's really the simplest thing, you'll hold his hands and reach for your mana just like we explained when you tried this when you were little, it will be so easy, Sanuar -"

Nod, nod. It would be easy if it was there at all. Unless it was in fact possible to have mana and not grab it, at seven or seventeen, in which case Sanuar was guaranteed to screw it up, but there was no point depressing his mother with this prediction.

"And then your father says you think you want to do water? We can have some water ready for your mana to imprint on right then. But you have a whole year to pick secondaries, do give those some thought, Sanuar, don't be careless."

"I will."

If he lived that long.

Sanuar studied plumbing.

Ens

The protests didn't stay around Ens's house for very long. People peeled off, exhausted, arrested, too hungry or thirsty to keep going. First they stopped camping out overnight, then they thinned out and disappeared even during the day.

Ens had gotten as far as asking the cook to make a tray of drinks and sandwiches to bring out to the protestors before her father had demanded to know what she thought she was doing. She'd had to listen to a lecture about how those people out there were out-of-control, subhuman, and would hurt her if they saw her out there unprotected, yes, even if she was bringing them food, yes, even if she didn't personally control anything they were protesting about, they would just hate her and want to attack her, *animals parasites trash* - Ens had to flee to her room and cry when her father let her go. Niomah Niomah *Niomah* , Sanuar had better survive Ens's stupid *stupid* plan and marry her because damned if Ens was ever going to make her suffer through the *Riawaes* as in-laws.

The protests ended. Ens was free to go. Presumably huge numbers of Arnysh people were desiccating slowly in their ghetto but Ens was not the least bit inconvenienced and she caught herself holding her razor in the wrong grip twice and forced herself to put it down, wait, *wait* , go look Arnysh in the dark at the plumbing exchange and do something halfway useful with your lordly parasitic self -

Ens brought her makeup kit to Sanuar's.

She hid it under the bed. She pretended in front of Niomah that everything was normal. Niomah was not live-in, yet; Sanuar's mother had ultimately said no, they wanted that extra room for guests. So when Niomah left at the end of the day Ens would telegram her parents, ask to stay overnight, tell Sanuar's parents that she had permission whether she did or not. Sit up with Sanuar until dark, work her half-magic half-art on their faces, and go out with him. His house was easier to leave than hers.

They'd leave notes under Sanuar's pillow and Ens fully intended for Sanuar to come back and rip his up and telegram a copy of hers to her house so that it would look like she'd tapped it over herself rather than implicate himself in her death. Stupid plan. Stupid *stupid*

-

Sanuar looked at her expectantly, after Niomah had kissed them goodbye.

And Ens blurted out, "Not yet."

"Why not?" asked Sanuar.

Reasons. Reasons that weren't *because I'd rather go home and bleed out in the bath alone*. He'd stop her, she was pretty sure, he'd do she didn't know what but *something*.

"Wait until your mage test," she said. Sanuar's problem was partly lack of direction, wasn't it? If he had mana when they checked again he'd be all set. He could take some predictable job and know exactly what he was doing with his day when he woke up in the morning, and marry Niomah and keep her safe, and forget all about Ens, goodbye Ens, isn't it sad, we were somehow under the impression that she was very attractive and valuable, so alas.

Sanuar put his head in Ens's lap.

"If you say so."

"I do say so." She brushed curls away from his face.

She left her makeup kit under his bed so she wouldn't have to smuggle it again. She stayed overnight in one of the guest rooms - not the one the Vayars were keeping Niomah out of, heartless bastards, give the poor girl someplace to sleep where she can have the basic creature comfort of a glass of water at midnight - and she stayed most of the next day and went home and did *not* slice her

neck open no not yet not yet wait wait wait your plan is stupid wait until they're okay wait wait wait *then* .

Wait wait wait -

Niomah

It was almost Sanuar's birthday and he was probably going to be all magical after it and Niomah wanted to get him a lovely present. The fact that she was going to be doing this with the pocket money he slipped her notwithstanding. The trouble was she was going to have to figure out how to do this with the soldiers on her block familiar with the range of times at which she was likely to come home from work, who would want to know where she'd been if she came from a different direction or even fifteen minutes late. This was not enough time to browse and make a purchase, even if she didn't factor in time to be cornered by bullies who wanted to spit on the little Arnysh bitch or police who wanted to supplement the soldiers and question her about what she was doing out of her ghetto and inspect her little glowing note.

In a pleasanter world she could have taken Ens along and they could have gotten Sanuar birthday presents together. That seemed like the most perfectly conventional benefit of a three-straw situation to the point where Niomah wondered why such arrangements were not more seen in shop advertisements: "Bring one boyfriend along while you both shop for the other!" Of course in a pleasanter world she would not be constantly wearing *attention, valid target* on her face all of the time and people observing such a message if she did choose to scrawl it on her cheek would not take the bait.

Niomah contemplated her options for being out of her home and able to buy a present. She could leave work early, if she spent less time flirting with her priceless artwork and her lost boy and instead actually cleaned all day. She could arrive late. She had been very punctual so far; would the Learned Sanuar's Parents take it amiss if

she were tardy or left sooner than usual? She did not know and could not well inquire of Sanuar himself about the matter of how she might purchase something for him, not if she wanted to be a surprise. She could risk trying to go home later in the evening than normal, hope that the soldiers didn't perceive her as a threat and weren't looking for something to nibble on just for the hell of it in the way they sometimes pawed at her as she went by.

She did not think she could very well wake up earlier than she usually did, not on the kind of sleep afforded by constant agitation on the streets outside. She did often wake up at four in the morning, listening to soldier dogs barking at some hapless person who was confused and senile and wandering, or who had wanted to go to the corner shop for overpriced hard candy to get their saliva flowing, or who tried to go across the street to check on their sick neighbor. But when she woke then it was with a kind of blind hatred for the entire universe that did not seem conducive to loving present-shopping.

She decided to risk the late return to the neighborhood. She *could not* lose her job. She still had an unemployed brother, still had to bring home water every day (Sanuar *had* given her a little cart, thank goodness), her grandfather had had to dip into family savings to get a new cane when his had been broken, and her sister-in-law was now pregnant. And it was her lifeline to Sanuar and through Sanuar, Ens. *Could not lose the job*. She would show up on time, every day, she would leave when she had always left, every day, and she would go past the guards whose names she knew and try to smile at them and hope they didn't shatter her water jugs or slap her or haul her into an alley to "search" her.

Of course this prospect was terrifying, so she kept putting it off.

And then some idiots, presumed Arnysh, blew up the bridge.

Sanuar

Niomah didn't come to work the day before Sanuar's birthday.

Sanuar noticed that she didn't bring up his breakfast; he wandered down to see what was going on. Maybe the cook was ill and Niomah was throwing something together and this was taking a bit longer.

The cook was there and his breakfast was waiting for him on the table. His parents were already eating.

"Where's Niomah?" he asked.

"Who?" asked Sanuar's father.

"The housekeeper," said Sanuar's mother. "I don't know."

"Oh, the housekeeper. The ghetto's sealed up tight. Nobody's going to come out of there for a while," said the Archmage, turning a page in his news dispatch. "Don't worry, whenever they do whatever it is they're doing to pacify the troublemakers she can still have her job. I don't want to have to find someone else, she does fine work."

"...What?" said Sanuar.

"Some Arnysh blew up the bridge. I assume it wasn't Nimah."

"Niomah. She isn't the blowing up bridges sort," said Sanuar.

"So I assumed. But they have to figure out who did blow up the bridge and make sure they're not going to do it again, eh?"

"...Father. Niomah brings home water every day. The water there is undrinkable. If they can't leave what are they going to do?"

The Archmage blinked. Then he laughed. "Well, I guess I know what you're going to do with your mana when you get it tomorrow. I'll take you up to the weather tower! You can make it rain. Very public-minded of you."

"I can't learn to make it rain fast enough for nobody in there to die of thirst! You -" Sanuar's mind spun. "You don't want to have to hire a housekeeper over again, I know you don't either of you do water but you know people who -"

"We know three people who do water, they're all also Archmages," said Mother, "and the Archmages have been strictly enjoined not to interfere with the situation in the ghetto at all. I believe the idea is that they won't hide the terrorists if this will cause them to get too thirsty. It should keep the whole mess short, at any rate. It would be something of a sneaky move to even have you doing it, Sanuar."

"And what if I don't even get mana -"

"You'll get mana," said Father, sipping his coffee. "Mark my words. You'll be a mage this time tomorrow."

"And while I'm trying to learn to control the weather people will *die*."

"Haven't they heard of boiling water?" wondered Mother. "You'd think they would get around to trying it."

"Sometimes the plumbing doesn't work *at all*!"

"Really?" she asked with mild interest. "Then they ought to be able to find the terrorists pretty quickly, and then I'm sure they'll let the Arnysh out to their various occupations."

Sanuar stared at her, then quickly averted his eyes and bolted down his breakfast and fled to the telegrapher.

This is Sanuar. Please give the telegrapher to Ens.

Ens

"Here," Ens's sister said, leaning into his room with the telegrammer in one hand. "It's for you."

Ens took it. *This is Ens. What is it?*

The reply was almost immediate, and had short followups; apparently Sanuar was too distressed to send in longer bursts. *The ghetto's locked down. Pause. Niomah's inside. Pause. Nobody's allowed to leave. Pause. Even to get water. Pause. Even if I'm a mage -pause- I can't make it rain -pause- not fast enough -pause- we need to go tonight -pause- tonight .*

Repetition being the only way to produce emphasis, on a telegrammer.

Ens looked at the message tape.

He read it over again.

Of his various terrible ideas, going and trying to fix the plumbing and, if they failed, at least having a chance of arousing their parents' ire against the soldiers enforcing the lockdown, seemed the least bad.

I'll come over.

Niomah

This had been her last day to buy Sanuar's present.

Now she couldn't even go to work and rinse the wasteful disgusting sweat off her skin and drink three glasses of water and kiss her lost boy, let alone buy him a present.

There was no bridge to jump off anymore. It wasn't going to require nearly that much will to get herself killed.

Hell, it wouldn't even be her fault.

What Niomah didn't think she could bear was watching her family dry up with her. Her oldest sister had gone without a drink of water at home last night. She worked in a plant nursery and could drink from the hose, though she wasn't allowed to take jugs with her, and she'd let the others have her glassful. Now she was trying not to cry and lose *more* water.

Hell, her sister-in-law was *pregnant* . Niomah could not stand to watch a pregnant woman die. Or to watch her body collapse in around the baby because this was not a world fit for babies.

And if Niomah could not even buy her lost boy a birthday present *there were no bright things to struggle on for anyway* .

She was going to sneak out after dark, she decided. She would tell her family she was going to try to get water, and she would go out through the back door and under the fence, and she *would* try to get water, *but she was also going to come back with something nice for Sanuar if she died trying* .

In the meantime she waited in the apartment with everyone else, too hot, too thirsty, too angry, too ragged around the edges.

She would find him something nice and he would tell her she was silly for having tried and she would kiss him and probably think of something very funny to say that she couldn't call to mind from this misery pit at this time.

Ens

She tried to act normal. She and Sanuar played board games. She ate dinner with the Vayars and made small talk about the state of their garden (thriving) and the upcoming masquerade ball at which they would next see her parents (thrilling).

Night fell.

She stayed up with Sanuar. They pled special exception to Sanuar's bedtime on the grounds that he would be a mage the next day. (They didn't say "probably".) His Learned Eminence laughed and ruffled Sanuar's hair and let them.

They waited until the Archmage and his wife were fast asleep, and the live-in servants too, and then they turned on all the lights in Sanuar's room, and wrote notes to their parents, which Sanuar went off to hide someplace they wouldn't be found right away even when they were noticed missing - and Ens got to work.

She couldn't make them look really Arnysh in full daylight. She didn't have that much paint. But she could deepen shadows, and gel Sanuar's curls, and wear a hat over her own paler hair, and she could pencil in key features around their eyes and noses and lips and chins and then smooth them out, and then she turned off *most* of the lights -

"You're sure *you're* not a mage?" breathed Sanuar.

"Not a bit," said Ens. "Not even worth testing me for late onset. This didn't even take boxed glamers, it's really just painting, I have a lot of practice. You think it'll do?"

"I think so," Sanuar said. "Okay. Let's get out of here."

"Don't touch your eyes," warned Ens. "Most of the rest will stick if you don't rub at it but don't touch your eyes."

"Okay," said Sanuar, and he led her out of the house, tiptoe-careful, and they started the long walk.

Don't die don't die save Niomah let me die but don't you die, Ens thought, following him closely.

"You know," Sanuar pointed out, when they'd been walking for about ten minutes, "you don't have to be along for this. I'm the one who knows plumbing. You already did my face."

"I'm coming," said Ens.

They walked.

"Why?" Sanuar asked.

"I can be your lookout," she suggested.

Sanuar looked at her over his shoulder - she was mildly impressed with her own work; she could tell it was Sanuar, but the streetlights weren't bright enough to make it clear that it wasn't a mysteriously Arnysh *version* of Sanuar. "You're sure you want to come?"

"Yes."

"We might die."

"I'll be your lookout."

"Ens -"

"Oh - and if I die and you don't please telegram my note to my house, say it's from me, it won't look any different -"

"Ens -"

"I'm *coming* ."

"I know you're coming. Will the makeup be ruined if I kiss you?"

She blinked. "No."

And he kissed her. And they walked the rest of the way holding hands.

Niomah

She was out!

She was smug. And high on adrenaline. And alive, as opposed to dead. And she still had to figure out how to get back in but that was a separate problem. While most of the Arnysh people in the city lived in the ghetto, this was not the case with all of them; to anyone who did not personally know her family she now looked potentially like the sort of Arnysh who had Made It and lived somewhere the water worked. With the lockdown she actually noticed she was being harrassed *less* walking the streets looking for a likely place to get a present, because she wasn't, to the casual guesser, one of "those" Arnysh. (Getting water would be harder. Needing water was suspect.)

She had no idea what she wanted to get him.

So she walked, and walked, and stopped at the fountain and drank greedily, and then her musing about whether Sanuar would like a magic book or if that would be too much of a Sanuar's Learned Father kind of gift was abruptly derailed because *what were her boyfriends doing there.*

That was them. That was how they walked and that was the way they held hands and that was a hat Ens owned. They looked oddly swarthy in the lamplight but she hadn't gotten a good look at them. Had she misidentified them? *What were they doing here ?*

Maybe she was wrong about who it was, but if it was really Ens and Sanuar, out for a moderately illicit midnight walk, she needed Sanuar to take her home and hide her in the garden shed until the lockdown was over, because on closer inspection the hole under the fence had a lot of old buried wire at the bottom. It hadn't made much noise scraping Niomah's belly when she'd squirmed through but it would make a scratching sound if she tried to push water over it in any

container she could reasonably get her hands on. She could not get more water to her family without getting caught and killed, but if she could be somewhere else they could split the remaining food in the apartment fewer ways; that would keep them going a little bit.

She went after her boyfriends, but they were both taller than she was and she was used to them slowing down to accommodate her. She kept them in sight but wasn't close enough to call out without attention from bystanders. Why were they out so late? Was this a habit they'd developed without her? If they were going to have a cute midnight walks thing she wanted a different cute thing with each one of them to be fair.

And then they turned the corner and when she followed after they were gone.

There wasn't even anything here. Closed restaurants, houses -

Municipal Plumbing Exchange Facility .

The place was guarded! She walked past, swearing under her breath, lest she loiter looking at the building suspiciously long. How had they disappeared so fast? How was she going to get in after them and tell them not to do stupid things?

Sanuar

Sanuar hadn't realized there would be quite so many guards around the Municipal Plumbing Exchange Facility, but he supposed in retrospect that it made sense. Fortunately, he was expecting that it wasn't very likely he'd survive the night, and had therefore taken the liberty of swiping a few of his father's spell beads in anticipation of never having to hear about his displeasure.

"You didn't tell me you were going to turn us ghostly," Ens said, when he'd pulled her through the wall.

"I didn't know I'd have to. I had them in case we needed them to get in," Sanuar said.

"Do you have *more*?"

"Not ghost ones," said Sanuar. "But when I was getting these I found what's probably Father's intended birthday present, and I took that, and it'll help with the pipes."

"When did you even do this?"

"When I hid the notes. They're in the bottom of the bag of taro in the kitchen, if you need to get them out without me."

"I will *not* -"

"Just in case."

Ens growled.

"We probably want to go downstairs," Sanuar added.

They went downstairs. And there was an absolutely massive labyrinth of pipes.

"I'm surprised there aren't any guards inside the building," remarked Sanuar.

"Ghost spells are *outrageously expensive*," said Ens. "Which you'd know if you'd ever had to go into a magic shop, I suppose. Nobody they know to be worried about can afford them."

"Still. I guess I'll get started. You're going to be my lookout?"

"Yeah. What other spells do you have?"

"I have a shouter and a couple of water spells from my early birthday present. That's all."

"Give me the shouter. You might wind up going too far in there for me to yell."

Sanuar gave her the shouter bead and went into the maze.

Niomah

Stupid boys stupid boys stupid boys. Niomah had circled the block twice. She was sure she'd be recognized by the guards if she did it a third time. Stupid boys, stupid boys.

She could not fight, sneak, or talk her way past the guards; they were alert and there were no quietly overlooked holes under any relevant fences.

...But it was a plumbing facility.

Niomah made a face, but she stalked along looking for *sewer grates*

.

Eventually she found a storm drain. It would not be comfortable, it would not be clean, but it was not bolted down tightly. She made sure no one was looking, and she got the cover off and climbed down the ladder into the dark.

It was pitch black, but she found a wall and shuffled along, relying on her sense of direction and the fact that this did have to lead to the place. (Didn't it?) (If it did why weren't they guarding it? Were they short on guards because they had the ghetto surrounded or did they not think of it or was she wrong and about to take a misstep into a waterfall and float away to the reservoir?) (That was pretty similar to jumping off a bridge. She could deal with that, although she hoped the stupid boys would stop whatever stupid thing they were doing even if she did not personally tell them.)

And eventually there was a flicker of light.

Niomah climbed up another ladder and peered up and through this grate there were a great many pipes.

And her lost boy, peering at them.

"Sanuar!" she hissed.

She startled him so badly that he fell over and clonked his elbow on a pipe. " *Niomah?* "

"No, the Duchess Mother! Of course it is me, what are you *doing* !"

"Trying to figure out all these pipes," said Sanuar sheepishly, getting on his hands and knees to undo the clasps holding the grate down and let her out. "Where does this *go* ?"

"Grate in street. How did *you* get in?"

"Ghost spells -"

Niomah's jaw dropped.

"I stole them from my father, and Ens has a shouter, I didn't have that kind of money lying around -"

"Money is *not* what I think! *Bringing water to ghetto invisible walking through things* -"

"...Oh."

"Oh! Stupid boys! Where is Ens?"

"She's keeping watch, over there -" Sanuar pointed. "I don't have any more ghost spells, though. We can get out through your grate."

"Yes. And not get my stupid boys *killed* ! And listen to very angry father shouting about ghost spells!"

"...But first I want to try to fix the pipes."

"Yes," grumbled Niomah, "all right, do, fix pipes, smart pipe fixing stupid boy."

"Sorry," murmured Sanuar, putting the grate back over the hole in the ground.

"And! And why are you done up like my uncle!"

"Ens did it. If we got caught and they killed us, uh, our parents would be mad."

"Mad at *who* !"

"The soldiers."

"The soldiers and those animal Arnysh making trouble complaining getting nice Gath boys in such a bad trouble," snarled Niomah. "*Always* blame Arnysh! Grasshoppers eat crops, blame Arnysh! Crowded mall! Blame Arnysh! *Always* !"

"...We'll wipe it off before we go."

"Yes you *will* . But fix pipes."

"I'm not totally sure what to do," Sanuar admitted. "I could *break* a lot of things. I could even fix some of the things I could break. I just don't know how to put them back *differently* , not without magic."

"Well, too bad it is not tomorrow, then. Could wait here *until* it is tomorrow?"

"No, I need the stuff they have set up for the test -"

And then Ens's shouter went off.

Sanuar

Niomah shrieked at the top of her lungs.

Sanuar grabbed her by the hand and took off; he didn't *really* know his way around but his eyes were probably better adjusted to the light and he'd seen some of it on his way inward. He almost yelled Ens's name, then thought better of it and yelled instead, "Artwork?"

"Here!" called Ens. "They saw me!"

Sanuar veered towards her and caught her other hand in his and then turned and ran some more.

"What do we do?" moaned Niomah, panting. "Back down -?"

"Did anyone see you go in it?" Ens asked.

"Don't think so."

"Then y- AUGH -"

Vents opened up and mist poured into the room. Whether this was scheduled or the guards trying to hinder the intruders Sanuar didn't know. Ens coughed; Niomah gasped. Sanuar couldn't see a thing. He had the water spells, but they'd been intended to keep the water in the pipes instead of flooding the basement when he started disconnecting things; he couldn't do anything with the *mist* that way.

"STOP WHERE YOU ARE AND WAIT FOR APPREHENSION," said a booming voice from nearer the entrance.

Sanuar squeezed his girlfriends' hands.

"Wish it was tomorrow," muttered Niomah.

"It's after midnight," said Ens, rubbing condensation off her watch and squinting at it from up close.

"DO NOT RESIST ARREST," roared the voice, closer, approaching.

"That doesn't help," said Sanuar, "I need to hold hands with someone with a birthday half a year off from mine -"

Niomah was suddenly clenching his hand *very* tightly. "Mage?"

"They don't have to be, but -"

"Hold my hands."

"Your birthday was two months ago!"

" *No it wasn't. Hold my hands.* "

Sanuar dropped Ens's hand and took Niomah's other one -

It was the easiest thing in the world.

There it was, deep and hiding and just about ready to come out -

Sanuar pulled.

And he reached for the water all around them. *This, see,* he told his mana, *look, it's your favorite thing,* and the brand new mana, being very impressionable, believed him instantly.

"Did it work?" Ens asked in his ear, her hands on his back. He was still holding tight to Niomah's.

"Yeah," Sanuar breathed.

"Now what?" Ens asked.

Sanuar cleared the mist out of their way and started rushing them through the maze of pipes again. "Now we get out of here."

"Look," said Niomah, as they skidded to a halt at the end of a path and veered left.

"Timrar?" asked Sanuar.

"Street in ghetto. Old fountain on it, doesn't get water any more. Water in that pipe?"

"Not right now," said Sanuar.

"Time to fix it before we run run run?"

Sanuar gathered the mist and clustered it around the guards chasing them thick enough that they'd have trouble breathing if they tried to do anything strenuous. Like run. "Maybe."

He took one of the stolen water spells, and cast it, and wrenched open a likely-looking valve. With the pressure under control he could twist open the Timrar pipe and steal a connector from another empty pipe and eventually -

"There," he said. "I think that's got it."

"STAND DOWN," snarled a frustrated guard.

"Nope," whispered Ens, and they ran back to Niomah's sewer grate and ducked into it, Sanuar remembering to close it behind them.

Niomah led the way and they came up in the street, damp and panting.

Across the street was a man with a dog who didn't look at all interested in reporting them to the police. The place was otherwise deserted.

"We've got to get this makeup off," said Sanuar. "If someone thinks we're Arnysh *and we don't leave corpses* -"

"Right, right," and Ens reached into her pocket for some kind of debatably magical cleaning cloth and wiped off Sanuar's face and then her own.

"And we must get away from this grate," said Niomah, hauling herself to her feet.

They all went briskly in a random direction, trying to calm down and not look suspicious.

Ens

"What," asked Ens, "are you even doing out of the ghetto? If you weren't in it when it locked down why didn't you go to Sanuar's -?"

"Was in," said Niomah. "Snuck out."

"You could have died," breathed Sanuar.

"Oh, who is talking? Would have died in there, no water. Lost boy, hide me in garden shed? Cannot bring water back, it would make noise, no more ghost spells."

"I - of course," said Sanuar. "I can probably get away with it for at least a little while, I don't know how often I'll be able to get away from magic lessons now but there's the garden hose -"

"Good. Maybe fountain in Timrar working, maybe not, better if I am not there eating everyone's rice. And you will be in so much trouble about the spells -"

"Well, yes, but I think he'll be too glad I'm finally a mage to actually strangle me or anything," said Sanuar. "I think I'm going to pretend this didn't happen and just try to look like I'm finding my mana for the first time, when they test me. I'll - ugh, I don't know what I'll say about the spells -"

"Were the ghost spells and shouter near your birthday present?" asked Ens.

"In his kit, yeah."

"So, you went looking for your birthday present and found it and those too and took them intending to put them back to - I don't know, to feel like a real mage? - and went for a walk and dropped them and they got lost," said Ens.

Sanuar made a face. "I have never done anything like that in my life. He will buy it completely. I'm still probably going to be in trouble for the next few weeks, though."

"Rich parents," muttered Niomah.

"Are *you* going to be in trouble?" Ens asked Niomah.

"They knew I left. Will be angry about worrying, later, but not for leaving."

"And I'm in the clear, unless the guard saw me better than I think he did and can recognize me without the makeup on," said Ens. "Although if Sanuar's in trouble I might not be able to visit."

"I don't think they'll forbid me the telegrammer, anyway," said Sanuar. "I could be wrong."

They turned right twice and headed back for the Vayar house.

"I'm going to learn to make it rain," Sanuar mentioned.

"Good," said Niomah. "Even with the Timrar fountain, if it's there - good. Put jugs and funnels out, plenty to drink."

They walked. They walked. They took the detour around the destroyed bridge.

"Are you still sad?" Ens asked.

"Who?" asked Sanuar.

"Either. Both."

"...Not *right* now," Sanuar said slowly.

"Ask when less tired," groaned Niomah.

"...You?" Sanuar asked Ens.

Ens thought about this question.

"I can," he said, " *imagine not being sad* ."

"Good," said Niomah. "Imagine not being sad, all grown up and done with parents being terrible and we will all live in a house and have so much rain and *damn damn damn still did not get Sanuar birthday present* ."

"You were going to get me a birthday present?" asked Sanuar incredulously. "While you were - *besieged* ?"

"Don't know word, don't care, *was* going to buy present. Still birthday, still time... everything closed now..."

" *Please* ," said Sanuar, "for my birthday, all I want is -"

"You can sign mine when we get back to his house," sighed Ens.

"- is for you to be safe and not dying somewhere because people are terrible," says Sanuar. "The garden shed will do. For my birthday please hide in the garden shed."

"Will. Will also give Ens some balances and sign his present," said Niomah, and then she checked for witnesses and then kissed them both, Sanuar and then Ens, on the cheeks.

Ens put her arm around her and kissed the top of her head.

"Happy birthday, lost boy," murmured Niomah.

Ens imagined living in a house with just the three of them and no sneaking and no wondering if Niomah was thirsty somewhere inaccessible and no hiding her dress in the back of the closet under everything else.

Sanuar was a mage and he could probably fund this by himself, in a year or so, even assuming maximal parental evil.

Ens smiled.

Consensus

"It was a suicide. I find it incredible that this is even in question," said the spokesperson for Consensus, Ltd.

"I find it incredible likewise, but from quite the opposite position," replied the Minister of Justice, "that being why it *is* in question, Ms. Sharpe. Please elaborate on why you believe the Prime Minister's death was not an assassination."

"Everyone should have a copy of the - good. As you can all see, the usage patterns show a substantial fraction of the Consensus participants advising Prime Minister Pham to kill herself. We don't deny this. But it's within the parameters of ordinary operation of the product, to which Dr. Pham voluntarily subscribed. Participants can advise subscribers to do anything they like. I myself have been advised through my own - admittedly lower-profile - Consensus feed to walk in front of a bus, to donate all of my money to the United Environment Initiative, to attempt to seduce actor/author Thomas R-

"Thank you, Ms. Sharpe," said the Third Undersecretary of State, "but that is not quite the sticking point. Move along."

Sharpe recovered momentum and proceeded. "Apart from a large number of people *suggesting* it, there was no harmful interaction between our product and the late Dr. Pham. The delivery of suggestions from the participant base of Consensus is *precisely* what she signed up for. She was free to not sign up, free to turn off her feed if it disagreed with her, and free to ignore anything her feed said while it was running. She was not assaulted or battered. She was not even in the conventional sense *driven* to suicide. She was not, in a word, murdered."

"You understand, I hope," said the Minister of Justice, "that neither you nor the corporation you represent are being accused of *committing* this murder. That responsibility would lie with the instigators of the massed voting."

"Honored minister, I and Consensus resent the implication that our product provided *even* a murder weapon. Dr. Pham's cause of death was suicide by overdose."

"And yet somehow I wouldn't expect the pharmaceutical manufacturer to send such a vigorous defender," said the Minister of Justice.

"I'm sure you can appreciate the magnitude of the difference between Consensus and a company that makes painkillers, honored minister. Our product depends heavily on subscriber understanding of the intended uses, and if people think that if they pick up a feed they will be murdered as though with no chance for their own desire for self-preservation to intervene -"

"Your marketing problems are beside the point, Ms. Sharpe," said the First Secretary of State. "Honored ministers, distinguished secretaries, I move that we dismiss Ms. Sharpe. Allowing Consensus a platform was a mistake to begin with. I want to hear from the so-called community leaders."

There were murmurs; the council took a vote; Ms. Sharpe, disgruntled, was ushered aside and others took her place.

"The council acknowledges Mr. Clark and Mx. Renault," said the Second Undersecretary of State.

"And," said the Minister of Justice, "invites them to explain themselves."

Clark and Renault looked at each other. It was unclear whether they both wanted to speak first or both wanted the other to take over;

regardless, eventually Renault spoke. "In the event," they said, "that the council determines that the Prime Minister was *killed*, the question of whether she was murdered per se is separate. We maintain that at no time did we or any of the other individuals acting under the banner of Free Thriving Tomorrow intend that Dr. Pham actually go so far as to harm herself. *At worst* the charge would be manslaughter, and we are prepared to contest even that."

"Gentlemen," said the Minister of Justice. The Second Undersecretary of State coughed. "...Gentlepersons," amended the Minister of Justice unsmoothly, "were you unaware of Prime Minister Pham's habits with regard to her Consensus feed?"

"We hadn't examined statistics," said Clark. "We didn't know how rigidly she - anyway, she had never tried to kill herself before, so we couldn't have known that she'd do *that*."

"The suggestion that she commit suicide had not previously attracted fifty percent of participants, let alone eighty-eight," said the Third Undersecretary of State.

"But we were not the *first* to suggest it," said Clark. "Only the best coordinated."

"Perhaps you would like to tell us *why* you coordinated to tell Prime Minister Pham to kill herself," suggested the Minister of Justice.

"It was a protest against the pardons she issued for the usury case last New Year's," said Renault. "We felt they were inappropriate and unresponsive to the magnitude of the harm caused by the perpetrators' predatory behavior against struggling families."

"It was symbolic," added Clark. "The victims of the usurers were harassed by the lenders night and day and led to believe that if they could not pay they were valueless. Pham spent a short period of time being told that she was not valued if she could not produce justice for those victims. Several of whom were themselves driven to

suicide, which is why we went with that instead of the alternative proposal of demanding that she repay the victims' debts out of pocket."

"Suggesting," called Sharpe from the side of the chamber. "Not demanding."

"That will be all, Ms. Sharpe," said the Third Undersecretary of State.

Sharpe quieted.

"Are there," said the Minister of Justice, "further questions for Clark and Renault?"

There were, but only a few verifications about when and how they'd rallied their supporters to converge on the Prime Minister's Consensus feed all at once. They were shooed to the side as well.

The next person brought forward to speak was Pham's psychologist. *She* was in favor of calling it murder or at least manslaughter and seemed to have been coached, or at least rehearsed. "There is no way to overstate the mental burden of believing that most of one's society would prefer that one was dead," she said.

"So you think that Free Thriving Tomorrow was, in effect, armed and dangerous," said the Second Secretary of State.

"Yes. To deliberately inflict this mob of detractors on someone is the worst form of cruelty and gaslighting," said the psychologist. "To do it to someone who has devoted her entire adult life to serving the will of the people is willful violence. It's possible that under slightly better conditions she could have survived, but in what would in a conventional assault case be called the 'eggshell skull rule', the perpetrators must be held responsible for harm that resulted from their attempt to cause harm, not what *would* have resulted if she had been having a better day."

"Thank you," said the Minister of Justice. "Do you have anything else to add?"

The psychologist was out of index cards. "Er, no."

"The council will deliberate in private now," said the First Secretary of State. "Peripheral attendees, please wait outside."

Sharpe didn't have to be told twice. She went out to sit in one of the chairs in the hallway and pulled out her phone. Yep - all the elected officials in the room and two of the appointees - not, unfortunately, the Minister of Justice, but one of his assistants - were looking at their feeds. Their feeds were already thoroughly in favor of calling it a suicide. Nobody in the room with a feed had less than a 70% track record of acquiescing to strong feed suggestions.

Sharpe put her phone away.

An hour later, the deliberations were over. Sharpe (and Clark and Renault and other peripherals) were allowed in to hear the Minister of Justice render the verdict, which obviously didn't please him one bit.

Clark and Renault: formally reprimanded, but not charged; but their organization was going to be investigated for possible obligatory dissolution on a moderately obscure hate speech charge.

Sharpe: not even reprimanded. Consensus, Ltd.: not even a murder weapon.

Sharpe and the Minister of Justice turned out to be parked next to each other outside.

"I want you to know that I still think your *product* is vicious," the Minister told her.

"Our product puts constituent opinion in the hands of people who want and need it," says Sharpe. "You might as well say a career in politics is inherently vicious."

"I might," said the Minister of Justice.

"I think you'd like Consensus if you tried it. And you'd see that you can ignore it whenever you like," said Sharpe. "You don't even need to tell the application all of the options you have under consideration. Have you ever looked at - not even the feed, the preferences settings?"

"No."

"Here, let me show you. This is mine, here -" Sharpe walked him through the filters and the inputs and the style options and the spam catcher. "If all you want to see is opinions on whether you should have toast or eggs for breakfast, you can do that. Not that this would make participating in your feed very popular, so you might not get a good picture of the population you're serving, but you could still do it."

"You're trying to say Pham used it wrong?"

"I never advised her on how to set hers up, honored minister, but she certainly wasn't taking advantage of some built-in precautions that would have - kept some of the hostility at bay. Look, can I get you a free one-year trial? No hard feelings."

Sharpe eventually got him to download the app. She helped him set it up. She made careful note of his ID number. She made very sure that he knew how to open up his settings if he wanted; she sent him to some instructions on how to make one's feed popular enough to get statistical meaning out of it.

She watched him drive away.

She navigated to his profile, brand-new, unused for now, and bookmarked it.

Just in case.

Explorers

"And if you want to proceed with the authorization, just sign here -"

"Are you not set up to take deliberate intentions?" Nuan asked. "I don't think I've been asked to sign anything since I went to a Planetary Era theme environment."

"This process isn't designed to be streamlined and convenient, Ms. Zhang, and we aren't doing it for aesthetics. You'd be surprised how many people back out between picking up the pen and writing their names," he told her.

"I'm sure. I've told you dozens of times, I'm sure."

"Then if you want to proceed, you can sign there."

Nuan picked up the pen. She signed.

"Is that all?"

"You can still decline to complete the process at any time in the next twelve subjective minutes."

"You'd almost think you didn't want participants."

"On the contrary, we desperately need them, and the quality of our research would probably be better if we could accept everyone who was willing to turn up in the first place, but this is one of the few real hazards left. Every environment has programmed safeties and even if you wander somewhere near-lawless you're continuously backed up, but this - Of course it's bristling with warnings. Most people go indefinitely without running into anything really *dangerous*, now."

"Well, I still want to do it."

"I'm not allowed to thank you."

"Social pressure...?"

"Precisely."

Nuan snorted. "What happens in the next twelve - eleven? - minutes?"

"Your algorithm fork will be prepared, and the cognitive rearrangement will be installed, and the result will be held static and checked over. We won't run her without your final authorization."

"Do I get to meet her?" Nuan asked.

"That depends on how she turns out. This is *dangerous in the extreme*, Ms. Zhang, your fork may be severely damaged by the alterations involved. She may be in no condition to meet anyone."

"But if she's not?"

"If your results are within *ideal* parameters, yes, you will get to meet her - if results are *slightly* worse than hoped for, rather than dramatically worse to the point where we have to terminate the fork, we will invoke clause nine in the disclosure packet you said you read and either require routine visits from you to help study her or permission to run an unaltered fork of you-now under contract to render that assistance."

"I don't have enough demands on my runtime to begrudge you a couple hours a week. How long will it take until you know?"

"Subjective time?"

"For this environment, yes, I'm not leaving till I know either way."

"We can rule out the likeliest failure modes in just a couple of subjective-here minutes once a fork starts running. If she asks to be terminated or evinces a total inability to communicate in any way during that time you can go straight to your home environment, all done. If something else happens -"

"And you think it will."

"We have theoretical reason to think it may. This sort of thing is hard to be sure of in advance, hence your involvement. If something else happens, you may or may not be needed to figure out the details of what."

"Right. Are you even trying to do something specific?"

"Not at this stage. If you would like to wait for a later iteration -"

Nuan shook her head.

"I'm supposed to tell you that nearly eighty percent of applicants who get this far leave the project during this final stage."

"I'm not going anywhere," said Nuan. "...Can I meet *other* people's forks?"

"We have no particularly encouraging results, yet -"

"But some of them can talk and don't seem suicidal. Right?"

"Yes."

"Please?"

"I... don't see why not. But this is early in the project, we aren't doing the *same* interventions on any two subjects yet -"

"That's fine. Something completely unrelated to what you want to do with my fork will be fine."

"Then - I don't see why not. I'll call one up."

There was a brief subjective delay, and then there was a third person in the room with them, transferred in at the project runner's mental request.

Apparently this fork could not only talk, but express complex preferences, because he was presenting as though he were physically eight years old, and couldn't have started that way. He didn't speak immediately to Nuan or the project runner, though. He had one eye closed, and sat on the floor, on his own feet, knitting invisible fabric with invisible needles.

"Hello," ventured Nuan.

The fork nodded thoughtfully.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"What's your name?" he replied.

"I'm Nuan," she said.

Nod, nod, went the little boy with his imaginary knitting.

Nuan looked at the project runner.

"Sometimes he produces intelligible conversation," the project runner said. "We haven't worked out a pattern of when yet. We don't have *any* results that look like the kind of transformation ordinary people might want to make to themselves specifically, so far."

"Oh."

The boy transported out of the environment.

"Did he leave himself," Nuan asked, "or did you send him...?"

"He did," said the project runner. "I wouldn't have brought a subject here who didn't have the intelligibility to be dropped back into their environment at will."

Nuan nodded. "...Is mine almost ready?"

"Very nearly."

"What do you call them? By their originals' names, or...?"

"Yours will be called Ms. Zhang, just like you, until and unless she asks to be called something else."

"I decided in advance that I wanted the fork to go by Mei. But I suppose she might not remember that, or - something."

"The alteration for your fork is not *expected* to affect memories in particular, but we cannot make any confident predictions in this iteration of the experiment."

"Will she have the memories of the twelve minutes of fork preparation?" Nuan asked. Of this awkward conversation, this blandly designed environment.

"They will be included, but depending on the results -"

"Right." Nuan nodded.

She could still tell them *don't run her, delete it, I changed my mind, I take it back* .

Instead she waited out the last seconds of fork prep, thinking to - herself.

Hi, Mei. Maybe you'll turn up so miserable that nothing I signed or said means anything and they have to quit running you at your own request. Maybe you'll turn up and you won't be able to make any sense of my memories and this message won't mean anything. But

maybe everything will go right for you and you'll get to play with a new kind of mind, so different we couldn't build it from scratch or get it by conventionally poking and prodding a standard human -

There's nowhere else to go, Mei, it's all been found and processed and turned into a substrate playground, and it's plenty nice, and some people have lots of fun wandering places other people have made for them, or sims of places as they were before anyone went tromping all over them, and some people don't seem to care about finding novel things at all, but it's not the same -

Whatever they do to you will be brand new, Mei -

You get to be an explorer.

"Run her," Nuan said when he asked.

And I opened my eyes.

Hubward

"You're not in your *head* ," said Book.

"No, you're not in our head," said Holly impishly.

"People have tried going past the Barricade before, you know. Generally they die. Or they come back hobbling along on legs they swapped from trapped birds. Or they meet *gakuoso* and they spend the rest of their lives in waking false-sleep and *if* they make it to a city without being slurped up like oysters by *klaonso* , they have to be behind the dreamward forever, like children -"

"When we were children, we didn't need to be there," contradicted Holly.

"Yes we did, just not for *all* the same reasons. We still had to learn to drowse mice."

"Someone could have done that for us," scoffed Holly. "If they knew it would work."

"What does Crystal think about all this anyway?" Book asked. "Does *Crystal* want to go - there?" He gestured vaguely, away and down, hubward: miles away was the Waste. At the moment there was a tiny blue sun receding in that direction, and a larger white one approaching a bit clockwise of the blue.

I want to find jewels and scrolls and traitstones full of treasures, thought Crystal dreamily.

"Crystal wants to wear the Crown of the Frozen Queen in our hair and be the darling of the Kuigao National Library," Holly reported.

"You'd look ridiculous in a crown, even with Crystal's posture," Book said. "You're too short. You don't have a remotely royal nose. You know *why* I didn't ask anyone if I could take your nose with me when I moved?"

"Because you hate our body?" Holly asked snidely.

"That's not fair. Crystal doesn't hate my body; that doesn't mean she'd want to live in it."

"We are still keeping that secret from Lightning," Holly warned, before Crystal panicked and reminded her.

"He can't *hear* me."

"I know that. And *you* know you want to go. But you think Lightning will think you're irresponsible."

"Well, he will. I can't volunteer to walk my cohabitor into a swarm of demons just like that."

"Let *me* ask him. Go to sleep, Book."

"You'd better let Crystal ask. Lightning always liked her better."

"You've not been able to see me talk to him for harvests now. He likes me just fine."

No, Book is right, opined Crystal.

Holly ignored that. "And Book?"

"What, Holly?"

"You wouldn't even *let* me ask Lightning if you didn't want to go." She smiled; it showed all her teeth.

Book rolled his eyes and went to sleep; his cohabitor took over with one long blink.

"Hullo, Lightning," said Holly.

"Crystal?" asked Lightning.

"No, Holly. But you can talk to her, if you'd rather," Holly sighed.

"I'd rather," said Lightning

Holly rolled her eyes and faded back. She was still aware, but only through Crystal: she knew it when Crystal thought thoughts, but didn't *feel* Crystal press her hands together and sit up straight - or *feel* how Crystal felt about Lightning. (Holly thought feeling anything for Lightning was weird. His body hadn't taken even one trait from them when Book moved, but Book still lived there, and Book was their brother, and that made Lightning their brother too, as far as Holly was concerned.)

I didn't ask to like him, you know, Crystal thought at her sharply.

I know, I know.

"Hi, Lightning," Crystal said.

"Crystal," acknowledged Lightning, yawning. "Where are we?"

"On top of the art museum. Are you tired? I don't have any mice with me -"

"Not really tired, no, don't worry," Lightning assured her. "What are we doing here?"

"Holly dragged Book up to talk without anyone listening because she - well, me too, but I think Holly will be up front for much of it - wants to go past the Barricade. And find treasure and possibly fight

demons. Small demons without such thick exoskeletons, I mean. We would have to run from anything like a *tuifnka* ."

Lightning blinked at her. Crystal waited, neither smiling nor frowning, watching his eyebrows move. He used his face in a different way than Book did - Book was still unaccustomed to it, still tended to smile and purse his lips in the ways that had gotten the best results when people had looked at him and seen a girl. Lightning had never had that problem.

Tell him we can live off the land and bring plenty of mice, thought Holly. Tell him we'll be rich. Tell him, she adds with sudden inspiration, that we can't go without him.

"We can't go without you," Crystal said, but she thought, *why won't you let me alone? Why won't you properly sleep?*

I don't have to. No one would if they didn't have to.

I would.

This was probably true. Crystal was nearly able to truesleep - not *quite* , however much she wanted to, but she had the knack of it more than Holly, who was always at least dimly aware of their body. Book could truesleep completely even before he left them; this was almost the only reason it was expected to be safe for him to move in with someone who was born alone, like most people.

"When would we go?" Lightning asked.

Crystal smiled. "After a shopping trip and letting our parents know. What else would stop us?"

--Fourteen harvests ago--

" *I'm not Holly!* " Book screamed. "Stop calling me *Holly!* "

Yeah! thought Holly. *Stop calling him Holly!*

"Where is Holly, then?" asked the doctor patiently. He was wearing a blue robe, very distinguished. He had a mustache. Book wanted a mustache. If he had to keep living in Holly's body he could *never* grow one. The doctor looked smart; could he understand?

"Holly is *sleeping*," Book simplified, because no one *ever* understood if any of them tried to explain just being faded back. "I named myself Book. Holly's asleep. So is Crystal."

Only sort of, thought Crystal.

He's trying to help, thought Holly.

"Those are the two imaginary cohabitators she's invented," said Chime, one of their mothers. Book could tell it was Chime because she sighed those little puffy sighs. Couldn't Chime tell the difference between her daughters and her son?

"I'm not imaginary, and Crystal isn't either," snapped Book.

I didn't make up anybody! I don't need imaginary friends! I have real ones, fumed Holly.

Chime said, "We humored her, we asked her if she could prove it, the way they - it was horrible, treating her like a criminal - Cloud, my cohabitor, wrote that she tried hiding a cookie, when Holly admitted to being Holly, and then 'Crystal' could find it. But Holly doesn't think that's how *adults* work. Holly didn't expect *me* to remember this after Cloud went to sleep."

"We don't sleep like grownups," Book grumbled. "We're different."

"Well," said the doctor. "If Holly and - Crystal?"

"Crystal," said Book firmly. "Holly named her. She couldn't think of anything herself."

Just not anything good, thought Crystal.

"Our parents only named Holly, not me and her," continued Book. "I kept asking Cloud what my name was and she just said Holly, over and over, and I'm not Holly."

"If they're really asleep, then when they wake up, they won't be tired," the doctor said.

"We've been up for almost ten sands," said Book.

"Well, yes, your body has," the doctor said. "But grownups learn to drowse mice, so their bodies can be rested all the time. When Chime sleeps, Cloud is awake, and when Cloud is awake, Chime sleeps. If Book is awake, and Holly and Crystal are asleep..."

"If we learn to drowse mice," Book said, seizing on this idea. "If we do that and then we can keep our eyes open all the time, swapping around, *then you'll believe us?*"

Why didn't you think of that? Holly thought.

Why didn't you? Book thought back.

"I think that makes sense," said the doctor genially.

"Put our tiredness in a mouse for us, then, and we'll stay up," said Book.

Chime cut in. "She'll only invent another reason why she's different, when it doesn't work."

"I admit there's a possibility that if one of us drowns a mouse for her she could claim we didn't really do it," acknowledged the doctor.

"Teach *us* to drowse mice," Book commanded. "We can do it ourselves."

I'm best at transportation, objected Holly. *I can already change colors on flat stuff.*

"Teach Holly," amended Book. "She'll get it faster."

"Well, if you'll go to sleep and send Holly out," said the doctor patiently - why couldn't *he* be one of their fathers instead of Reed and Mountain? - "then I think Chime and I can probably make some progress on that."

Book faded back, but not all the way, even though *he* could, because he wanted to learn this too.

"I'm Holly," Holly announced, surging forward. "How do I make a mouse be tired instead of me? Teach me how now."

"You think she's - actually - *naturally* - she was just born with several souls -" Chime murmured.

"A great many things are possible," the doctor said.

Crystal started the hike awake. They weren't likely to run into anything dangerous early in the trip, and she and Holly were agreed that Holly was the fighter between the two of them. Book was awake, and he was ranging a little ahead, hauling himself around on his walking stick over the rocks. Her body was lighter, nimbler, and she hadn't picked up a branch yet. Crystal was carrying their mice in her backslung cage and Book had the food and the pure water. Their white fox Tiag - Book still claimed one-third ownership even since vacating the body Tiag recognized as her master - trotted along after.

"Demons don't eat animals," Crystal said. "Right?"

Book would have said to leave her at home, if they did, Holly pointed out.

"Tiag's going to be fine," Book said. "She doesn't have a soul. If she did the *klaonso* would've eaten it the first time she took a nap outside the dreamward."

" *Klaonso* aren't the same as demons with bodies."

"They all eat souls, Holly. *Klaonso* are just the only ones who can do it without physically attacking."

"Not Holly, *Crystal* . I can tell you and *Lightning* apart -"

"Oh. Sorry. I keep being surprised when I see you in front," Book said, looking over his shoulder. "Given that you have that enormous crush on Lightning, wouldn't you want to spend more of your wake time when he's out and not me?"

"I like him. But you're still our brother," Crystal said. "I don't want to just never talk to you again. I'm surprised Lightning could do it. You were his friend, before."

Book shrugged. "Everybody has to make tradeoffs, when it comes time to cohabit. Except you."

"We still miss you," Crystal said softly.

"I'm here," Book said.

"Right. Not *here* . I can't hear you thinking anymore."

"Would you want to hear me thinking *ugh, ugh, ugh, I'm growing breasts* ? I think that's most of what you missed."

"No," she admitted. "I guess this is better. You were never all the way happy."

He was so uncomfortable all the time. I bet that's why he learned to go completely asleep! thought Holly in a flash of insight.

"I miss you too, sometimes," Book said. They came to a brook and started moving along it, looking for a spot with a solid place to jump to on the opposite side. "It's very quiet in here."

"If Lightning were the tiniest bit awake, I'd have to mind my chat," laughed Crystal softly.

Book shuddered. "I'm not going to talk you into telling him, certainly. What if he said *swell, let's mix some properties?*"

"He's not my brother!"

"He cohabits with me. That *makes* him -"

"Everyone else mixes *body* properties. You only moved your soul."

"Yes, well, everyone else is discarding one of the bodies when they move in together. I was leaving my original behind with two people still in it. I would've liked the eye color, maybe the feet, maybe the ears, but you're *using* them."

"Lightning didn't get more related to me when you moved."

"Did *I* get *less* related to you?"

"No," mumbled Crystal. "You were - oh, never mind."

Book sighed. He found a good place to jump. They leapt, with Tiag clinging to Crystal's shoulders. Tiag was domesticated with a troport from a dog, but unlike dogs, she climbed around on people in a manner very like a kitten.

Tiag barked.

"What?" Crystal said quietly.

Demon? This close to home? Holly thought.

Crystal drew their knives, and Holly woke up as much as she could without sending Crystal to sleep just yet, trying to help process the forest. The nearest sun was a low red one, and it made the ground not shaded by dark-leafed trees look splattered with blood. Book had a string of miniature spears dangling from his belt; he plucked one, troported sizes between it and his walking stick, and held the weapon ready.

"Maybe you'd better let Lightning," murmured Crystal.

"Not tired enough," Book muttered back, maneuvering to stand with his back to hers.

Crystal shuddered. She didn't know how Book had given up *that* ability, in spite of everything - to fade back at any moment, instead of accumulating mental fatigue over sands and sands first. She didn't want to fight a demon. If one appeared, Holly would do it.

Tiag didn't bark again. She just clung to Crystal's shoulder and sniffed the air with her little black nose.

"False alarm?" Book said, after the still and red-lit forest dislodged no threats in their direction.

"Maybe," Crystal said.

They pressed on. Book used the spear as his new walking stick, since it was already grown.

--Thirteen harvests ago--

"Cloud?" Holly said.

"You need to walk Tiag yourself," Cloud said.

"Crystal did it. It's something else."

"Well, what is it - um - Book?" Cloud was not good at guessing. They had three different wristbands, now, but they faded in and out quickly enough that they sometimes didn't bother. Their black hair was too short to style differently depending on who was talking. They could always just tell people.

"No, I'm Holly, but it's *about* Book." Book himself was as deeply asleep as he could get. He did not want to have this conversation; he wanted Holly to do it for him, so she would.

"Why isn't your sister talking to me herself, then?" asked Cloud.

"That's the thing. Book is a boy."

Cloud blinked. "Holly, all three of you share a girl body, just like me and Chime share a woman body."

"Yes, I know, but Book doesn't like it." And it was getting worse as they grew older. Book went to sleep every time they needed a bath, and spent his hoarded suns on ugly androgynous clothes now, instead of the namesake books he used to collect.

"I suppose if I could adjust to there being three of you at all, I can start calling him your brother, then," said Cloud amiably.

"Book wants to move out," Holly said. "Into a boy."

"Oh." Cloud sat back. "I - I don't know if that's doable. You aren't the same as everyone else."

"We know that," said Holly. "But can you find someone who knows about it? And ask?"

"I suppose," Cloud said. "I'll let you know. I suppose if he wants to do that he'll have to find someone to move in with."

"I guess we have to go back under the dreamward, then," sighed Holly.

"Maybe you'll make some friends," said Cloud.

The red sun marched counterclockwise and no replacement was yet close enough to properly illuminate the forest. Holly climbed a tree, and spotted a swift green sun that was coming up behind them, high in the sky.

"Stop here for dinner?" asked Lightning. "Follow the green sun when it gets closer?"

"Yes," said Holly. "Do you need a mouse?"

"Yeah," Lightning said. "My feet are killing me."

He should have let me pick out better shoes for him, fussed Crystal.

Holly moved the mouse cage from her back to where she could reach it, and picked a gray-furred one up by the tail. Lightning took it from her hand, focused, and offered it back. Holly replaced it, and took a fresh one for her own aching knees and complaining heels, as well as accumulated fatigue. The discomfort drained away as soon as she focused on it, and herself, and the point of contact between her hand and the mouse's tail. The mouse yawned when she put it away.

"Rocks or tree bark?" Lightning asked.

"Rock's easier to troport," Holly said. "Tree bark makes for easier portion sizing. Your call, I can do either one. Didn't you go on Wilderness Survival?"

Lightning picked up a couple of meal-sized rocks and handed them to Holly, who rubbed dirt off them with the heel of her glove. "Yeah,"

he said. "We went rimward, though, along the canyon. There was fruit."

"You took a Wilderness Survival class that didn't cover *troporting edibility*," said Holly, staring.

"I told Crystal about it once."

He did, thought Crystal, *last planting, in the butterfly garden.*

"I'm not as asleep as *you* get, when she's in front. That doesn't mean I'm paying attention," Holly said. "Hand me a raisin, and one of whatever you want after I've done my rock."

Lightning unpacked a sticky, dehydrated grape. "Do you want your checklist?" he asked.

"Uh, lemme see if I remember everything on it," she said, closing her eyes. "Edibility. Large and small nutrition. Texture - in the case of the raisin, I have to open it up and touch the inside to not just get lots of solid peel. Taste."

"Smell," Lightning added.

Yes, you need your checklist, Crystal thought.

"Well, that one's not really necessary anyway," said Holly, but she let him hand over the checklist anyway. She set her rock on one knee, and touched it with one hand, and held the raisin between thumb and forefinger of the other and split it open with her nail. Carefully, she turned the rock into a decent facsimile of the raisin, and the raisin into a raisin-shaped pebble, as inedible and nutritionally worthless and hard and mineral-flavored as the rock.

"Is *any* of it necessary? I could just port sizes. I can do sizes, when it's just yea big," Lightning said.

She bit into her raisin, then tore off a raisin-sized piece of it and passed it to Lightning to be put away again. "Well, sure, you could just blow up a peanut or whatever, but it's got as much nutrition as a tiny one if you do it like that. People have starved to death filling up on giant food they made by shortcuts, you know. You're lucky you have me. What can I get you?" she asked.

Lightning passed her a crumb of the dry bread, and his sponge.

"Pampered housedweller," teased Holly. "You want *nice* bread."

"Can you make it or can't you?"

"Yeah, if I pour water over the sponge first." She held her raisin in her teeth and performed the necessary operations to trade the essential features of bread and stone, and then to move moisture from the sponge to the crustless loaf. She handed the dried sponge and the puff of bread over to Lightning.

He bit. "This is terrible," he said.

"I'm not a *chef*. It'll keep you going. There's a reason we don't eat food made of rocks when we don't have to carry everything we eat, anyway," said Holly. Her raisin tasted fine to her.

Maybe you forgot a step on the bread, Crystal thought.

I did not. He's just got a housedweller palate, that's all. "Don't forget to save a crumb of it, since you like it so much," she said.

The green sun began to shed appreciable light over them when Holly had finished her raisin and Lightning was through with his bread. They got up to chase it hubward.

--*Twelve harvests ago*--

That one, thought Book. *I want to look like that.*

You want to be a towhead with arms as long as some people's entire bodies? Holly thought.

Yes, thought Book firmly.

"Hello," Crystal said.

The blond boy looked up from his book. "Hi," he said.

"I'm Crystal."

"I've heard of you," he said.

Crystal sighed. "Everyone seems to have."

"It wasn't anything bad. Just odd. You're already cohabiting and you come to mixers anyway."

"What's your name?" Crystal asked.

"Lightning."

"I'm Crystal."

"I know. You said," says Lightning.

"Oh. Sorry," said Crystal, cheeks warming. "And my cohabitators are Holly and Book."

"That sounds familiar," said Lightning.

"We come to mixers because Book wants to move out," Crystal said.

"But you're a - you're girls," said Lightning.

"Book isn't."

"How's that meant to work?" Lightning asked.

Crystal shrugged. "It just happened, is all. So he wants to move out of us and into somebody like you."

Lightning looked at the little list of things to be concerned with that they always handed out at mixers. "Responsible, communicative, keeps promises, shares my risk tolerance?"

"Yes and yes and yes, and what's your risk tolerance?" Crystal asked.

"Heh, that's funny, he's got references already," mused Lightning under his breath. "I don't want to volunteer for the navy or anything. But... I don't know, I'd work it out with my cohabitor first, but I might want to do something a little dangerous someday. Go cloudwalking, or sail to Marheen, or try for the Luin Sunstone. Who knows?"

Cloudwalking has always looked like fun to me, Book thought.

Crystal nodded. "Book is about the same. He mostly studies things, but he pays attention in our knife classes, and he wants to learn spearfighting after he moves out. Cloudwalking sounds like fun to him."

"Cool," said Lightning with a left-leaning smile.

Crystal liked his smile.

"What the longdark spitting-pit *is* that?" shrieked Holly, running as fast as she could. She had the mouse cage clutched to her chest and her arm thrust into it so they were all touching her, and she was pouring exhaustion into each in turn, because whatever it was, it wasn't slowing down. Tiag on her shoulder was barking and whining by turns, earsplitting, afraid.

"I don't *know* !" Book shouted back. He didn't have the mice with him, but he had better endurance; Holly could only hope that was enough, she didn't want to have to figure out a way to transfer the mouse cage to him midstride. "I didn't get a good look at it before I started *running for my life* !"

"It's too small to be a *tuifnka* -"

It didn't have wings, did it? Crystal thought.

No, thank all the luck - Holly responded.

"I told you I don't know what it is! Except that it's obviously a *demon* and it's got more armor on it than the entire Sixth Fleet! There - there - see - there's a -"

"I see," said Holly, and she veered right, towards a cracked-open tree that looked like lightning had struck it. From a distance it *looked* like it could hold them both in the trunk, and keep the demon out of reach -

"No good," she corrected after a closer look at the crevice, and she charged down the hill; they had a few pounds on the demon if she guessed right, and their speed would benefit from the slope more. Book didn't argue with her, just followed. "Do you think it can climb?"

"I don't know! I don't know what it is!"

He can't think straight when he's scared, ask him questions, make him answer you, urged Crystal.

" *Think* ! What *could it be* ? Can any of those things *climb* ?" cried Holly.

Book either lacked the breath to reply or didn't see the point. He didn't need to; after they'd run for a few strides more he found a

likely-looking tree and threw himself up into its branches. Holly was shorter, and had to skid-turn to get to the other side of the tree in search of a lower handhold. The first one she tried broke off in her hand and she scanned for a second choice, frozen in place.

"It's coming! Find another tree!" screamed Book, already halfway up his.

Holly bolted. Book's tree acquired a new claw slash in its bark, right where she'd been standing. She poured more weariness into the mice, but she was running out of fresh ones; all but a handful were sleeping it off at the bottom of the cage. She ran anyway.

Finally she located a tree barely even shouting-distance from Book's that she thought she could get into. She went up: one body length, two, three, until she was well out of clawing range and short on higher branches that could hold her.

Tiag wasn't on her shoulder anymore, but Holly couldn't worry about that, couldn't think about anything except getting away from the demon and figuring out what it was and how to kill it...

She clipped the mouse cage closed, breathed deeply, and looked for the demon.

Holly had apparently gained on it while zigzagging through the woods in search of a tree. It caught up presently, though.

She had no idea what kind it was. There were a few hundred kinds of demons; she only knew the common ones, and this headless whiptailed thing, with its bladed forelimbs and caterpillar legs and segmented plates of armor all in black gloss, was not a common one. Book was the one who knew this stuff. Book would know its common name and its epithet and which foreign zoo dared to keep one and which of their scarce weapons could crack it open and destroy it.

And Book had not had a chance to inspect it.

"Go back to Book's tree," she told it. "He'll know how to kill you. Go on."

It can't understand you, Crystal thought.

I know!

The demon, which after all couldn't understand her, circled the trunk of her tree. It emitted a yowl-roar, which Holly could vaguely imagine was frustrated. They ate souls and couldn't starve to death and only ever got to hunt a handful of stupid explorers, it had to be ravenous.

That did not mean she was going to let it eat her.

"BOOK!" Holly yelled at the top of her lungs. "BOOK, CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

There was no answer. Or none that she could hear.

--Eleven harvests ago--

But you like him, Holly thought. *It's in all the fact sheets, you don't cohabit with your friends.*

It doesn't matter if I like him, Book thought. *It's better if I don't, afterwards I never get to talk to him again,*

You like us, though, Holly thought.

You I had better like, hadn't I? You I'm awake at the same time as, we read each other's minds, that's not going to be how it is with me and Lightning.

We'll miss you.

I'll still be around. We'll hang out all the time! But I - I can't do this anymore, I want to be him , I want people to look at me and see that , please understand.

Holly understood. So did Crystal, who was less inclined to complain in the first place.

Are you going to go live in his father's house? wondered Holly.

Book thought, *I might hang out there sometimes. I'll still keep my books and things in our storeroom. Unless you want to kick me out of it.*

Never , Crystal thought.

Holly agreed, *Not ever.*

You pay a third of the rent, Crystal teased.

But when the day came, Holly wouldn't walk their body into the room where the move would take place, and Book had to shove her out of the way and stomp through the door himself, and Crystal was faded far with trepidation.

His sisters hung back, listened to him think, waited.

The troporter who would be making the transfer looked nervous. She was consulting a checklist. "You are - Book?" she says. "Book and his cohabiters, and you're moving with no physical alterations in with - Lightning?"

Book nodded.

Lightning was late. Book sat. The nervous troporter re-read her checklists. "Have you considered the risks?" she said.

"Yes. It's - it's important," says Book. "We all understand. But it's important and I need you to try."

The troporter's mouth was a thin line. "You realize if something goes wrong it's not only you -"

"My sisters understand," said Book.

Your sisters will miss you, thought Holly.

"They'll miss me but they understand."

"And Lightning?" said the troporter.

"The risk to him is much smaller - right?" asked Book.

"Yes, but I can't claim there is none."

"He understands too, anyway."

The troporter asked no further questions.

Lightning arrived half a sand late. His father was with him, which one Book couldn't tell for sure. The father hung back and Lightning came forward.

Soon Book would get to see that face in the mirror, just exactly *himself*, the way he'd look if he weren't crammed in with -

It's not like we're ugly, thought Holly.

But, thought Book, *you're a girl.*

Don't let these be the last things we think to each other, pleaded Crystal. *We love you, Book, and we're happy for you -*

I love you too. Hey, he added, *soon I can hug you, won't that be something?*

Holly couldn't laugh aloud with Book in front, but she could think it.

Book was smiling when he nodded to the troporter that he was ready.

Holly had all the mice. When Book's soul got tired, Lightning could take over. When their *body* got tired, they needed her mice - unless they could catch a wild animal alive while stuck in a tree. Book might be able to troport food; he had the samples and Holly was just the best troporter, not the only person in the party capable of it. Holly, if she had to, could kill and open up a mouse and turn tree bark into quantities of... raw meat (except Book had her checklist, but she didn't need her checklist). She dearly hoped it didn't come to that. She had no idea where Tiag had gotten to but the fox ought to be the least of their worries...

Book, quite reasonably, was staying up in his tree, presumably not wanting to be caught off guard by the reappearance of the demon, but if he could hear her, she couldn't hear his replies.

Holly started evaluating her ability to get from her tree to an adjacent one without falling straight into the demon's claws. If she could even get a few trees over, close enough for Book to hear her, she could tell him where the demon *was* and he could have freedom of movement while it was busy cornering her.

She'd come from that direction. The next tree over had bad handholds or she'd have climbed it instead, but its upper branches looked plausible.

It might be that he could hear her and she couldn't hear him. Before she risked it, she hollered:

"BOOK, IF YOU CAN HEAR ME, I'M GOING TO WAIT ABOUT A TENTH OF A SAND, THEN TRY TO GO TREE TO TREE IN YOUR DIRECTION. THE DEMON'S HERE AND IT WON'T LEAVE."

There. Now to follow through.

I'm scared.

"Me too, Crystal," Holly muttered, "me too."

Her time sense was okay, but Crystal's was better. Crystal faded forward to count rapid heartbeats and watch shadows of the quickest nearby sun (low, blue, fast) lean from hubward to rimward.

It's been about a tenth of a sand. But - but wait - I'm -

"I'm scared too," said Holly, and she inched along the branch towards the other tree.

--Eleven harvests ago--

Lightning was awake first.

Crystal hadn't known to expect that *Lightning* would be awake first. She'd expected to be able to confirm right away that Book was there, that he was okay, that he was comfortable.

And instead she and Lightning were sitting together awkwardly, under the dreamward until it was confirmed that both of them could swap as necessary and stay awake.

It's so empty in here, Holly thought.

It's emptier for other people.

That doesn't mean it's not... empty.

"You feel okay, right?" Crystal asked Lightning.

"I feel - normal," he said. "I guess we won't know for sure whether it worked until I need to sleep. I hope I figure out how to transfer consciousness soon."

"Oh, yeah," said Crystal vaguely. "That takes practice, doesn't it, for most people?"

"Yeah. Maybe Book will be able to do it just as easily with me as he could with you, but - I can't."

But I want to talk to Book, thought Holly. *I miss him, I miss him -*

I miss him too. "People figure it out even without practice by the time a few days have gone by, don't they?"

"Yeah." Lightning sighed. "All my friends are going to want to know why I don't look different."

"Did you want to?" asked Crystal. "You look handsome, Book picked you out specifically."

"I didn't - *need* to. I just thought it'd be more of a negotiation. I didn't lose anything. I got a perfectly good cohabitor without having to compromise and make tradeoffs and I think a lot of the lectures I got about it were wasted."

Crystal giggled.

"Was that funny?" asked Lightning.

"It - yes, a little. It just means that you and Book are a good fit, you see? He didn't have to compromise either. He got his very first choice. He wanted to look like you. You work other ways, too. I'm excited for when he wakes up and - and does. I miss him and so does Holly but we're glad he's going to be happy and - and *thank you* ."

"You're welcome," Lightning replied, sounding unexpectedly touched.

"When do you think you'll be able to sleep?" Holly asked.

He blinked.

"I faded in, I'm Holly," she said impatiently.

"Oh. I don't know - two sands?" He hesitated, then said, "If you want to come back to my house to wait you can."

"Thank you," said Holly.

It was about a sand and a half.

And then Lightning blinked and Book opened his eyes.

Holly could tell instantly and they met in the middle, trying to hug each other; he misjudged the length of his arms and clonked her on the ear but finally figured out how to manage his elbows. " *Book* . You're okay?"

"I'm -" Book shook his head. "I'm *good* , Holly." Pause. "It's - Holly, right? I never had to tell from the outside - wow, your *voice* sounds so -"

" Yes it's Holly, don't be silly of course you can tell -"

"Well, let Crystal have her turn -"

Crystal took her turn without Holly having to do much letting. "It worked, I'm so glad it *worked* !"

"I want a *mirror* ," said Book.

"I saw one on the way in, I think -"

They managed to walk awkwardly to Lightning's house's entrance hall with the mirror in it without unhugging.

And Book looked in the mirror and *stared* .

"Good?" Crystal asked.

"Bit late if you want to change your mind," Holly leaned forward to comment.

" *Perfect* ," said Book.

Holly was tempted - and urged by Crystal - to creep to the edge of the branch, crouching and holding onto another branch overhead, ready to back up in a hurry if something creaked, and then creep from the edge of her destination branch to the trunk of the new tree.

Holly thought that if she *was* going to fall she'd rather be in more control of her momentum than that, and was about to try to jump the distance.

Crystal shoved her back. "No, absolutely not, *no* ."

If I jump then if we fall it's on our feet and we can run -

"You'd break an ankle." Inch, inch, inch.

I'll do it holding a mousetail in my teeth?

"That's disgusting, Holly. And you can't troport a broken ankle fast enough, the demon is *right there* ."

It was, indeed, right there, right under them. They might not even break an ankle if Crystal slipped, they might just fall directly into its waiting claws and be torn to shreds.

Crystal didn't slip. She got onto the branch of the next tree. She shuffled as best she could towards the trunk, and hugged it. She'd gone just a few meters, no more, but -

"BOOK?"

Nothing.

How many times were they going to have to do this to get within shouting distance?

If they stayed put, how long would it take the demon to lose interest?

"BOOK, THE DEMON'S PAYING ATTENTION TO ME. YOU CAN GET OUT OF YOUR TREE AND COME CLOSE ENOUGH TO TELL ME HOW TO KILL IT."

Silence apart from demonic chittering.

Crystal maneuvered around the trunk to look for a way closer to the way she'd come.

And then she heard Book's voice, terribly faint -

"Can you hear me?"

"I CAN JUST BARELY HEAR YOU," Crystal hollered back.

"- to me," called Book. "Fire and -" Something. "- a *pragsuu* -" something.

Holly came forward. "I DON'T GIVE A DRAINED SHARD WHAT IT'S CALLED, HOW DO I KILL IT? FIRE, DID YOU SAY FIRE?" she shouted.

"- yes -" something "Fire and -"

"FIRE AND WHAT?"

"Fire and *oil* -"

"IT HAS TO BE OIL FIRE IN PARTICULAR?"

"Yes -"

"ANYTHING ELSE?"

"That's all," Holly thought she heard.

"I'LL DO MY BEST."

Holly looked at the tree she was in. If it didn't have any oil she could extract, she was likely out of luck. She also wasn't sure how to start a fire. Why wasn't she carrying the food? She could really use a peanut. And a match.

Great.

--Four harvests ago--

"Crystal, that's completely -"

I know I know I know.

"He's -"

Stop talking aloud, what if Mountain hears you?

He wouldn't believe it if I told him outright, I barely believe it and I can read your mind - Lightning . The one who cohabits with our brother.

Mountain doesn't like it when we talk out loud amongst ourselves anyway -

Don't change the subject, thought Holly.

I don't know what you want me to say. I didn't decide to have that daydream.

That utterly mortifying daydream!

Why won't you learn to sleep? Why won't you just leave me alone?
despaired Crystal.

Holly flumphed onto the bed.

I didn't mean that, Crystal amended.

Yes you did. You wanted to be alone in our head, you wanted me gone.

But just for a second. I don't want you to leave. It's bad enough Book left.

It's just when I have opinions that it's -

What if it was you? What if you had a crush on Lightning?

I never would! thought Holly.

But what if you did, what if he was your type and what if he liked you enough that you sometimes thought maybe -

Then I wouldn't want you ranting, but what if I did something that made you want to rant?

You do that all the time, Crystal pointed out.

Holly groaned.

I'm not going to do anything about it, Crystal added. *He'd probably think it was weird, too, I don't want people to think I'm weird. You I can't help, but...*

Good.

Are we going to have to agree on who we kiss? Just because we can't quite sleep...?

I don't even want to kiss anyone, Crystal.

Ever?

You can do it if I'm not paying attention and it's not Book's face you're kissing, suggested Holly. Kissing, daydreaming, whatever. Just don't accidentally think about me or I'll notice what's going on.

Okay.

But avoid daydreaming when I'm noticing things.

I'll try, Crystal thought dubiously.

Holly was systematically scrubbing a relatively clean woodchip from the mouse cage all over her face. If they'd done a normal merge they'd certainly have gotten rid of the oily skin in the process, but here they were with what they'd been born with, and for the moment she was too relieved to be annoyed.

She scrubbed her fingertips into the wood. She got a splinter, and this was distracting enough that she paused to swap the splinter's color with a leaf so it would be easy to see and she could pick it out. When she proved unable to get ahold of the splinter even while it was clearly visible through her skin, she swapped its *texture* with the leaf, too, and then it was too soft to hurt much. She resumed working oil into the wood.

How much was enough? Better to keep at it until she was sure she had as much as she could collect. She didn't even know yet how she was going to set it on fire. She felt at her hair: no. Dry, reasonably clean, and too puffy to easily run a woodchip through for oil anyway. She went back to scraping it across her forehead.

When her face was raw and she had two more leaf-soft splinters in her fingers, she had an idea she thought might work for setting the chip on fire.

We'll freeze to the branch, thought Crystal.

"Do you have a better idea?"

Crystal didn't.

"Do you think either of us will come up with one if we wait?"

Crystal... didn't.

Holly put one of her splintered fingertips to the bark of the tree. She held the oiled woodchip in the palm of her hand. The demon circled below, chittering.

Most troports were swaps. If she swapped the warmth between the tree and the woodchip, they wouldn't change much. The tree might get a little warmer, because the woodchip was warmed by her hand and the tree was barely touching her relative to its size.

Some troports, like the one that had put Book's soul into Lightning's body, were transfers.

Transfers moved *all* of a property, not just an amount appropriate to the target object.

Holly moved *all* of the warmth in the tree into the tiny woodchip.

She was intensely uncomfortable, immediately, in too many ways to make clear sense of right away. The tree froze solid under her shoes; the branches stiffened and snapped. Including the one under her.

The woodchip burst into flames in her hand and she fell towards the demon and thrust the flaming thing at its lack of a face.

The fire caught. The demon's exoskeleton crackled and split; it leaked black sludge. The sludge burned. The demon writhed.

Holly staggered away from it and the frozen tree, towards warmth, towards Book. She reached for her mice. There was only one that was definitely still alive. Several of her fingers on the hand that hadn't held the woodchip were numb. She didn't dare swap it her injuries or her cold. It might die; they were going to need to drowse it to make it home. She didn't dare try to swap her chill into a different tree - then she'd be the tree's temperature, all over, instead of frostbitten but basically intact from being too near the frozen wood. If she transferred instead she might well catch fire just like the woodchip.

Crystal probably wouldn't even be able to walk if she came forward, she'd just collapse, crying. Holly took another step, and another. Book. Where was Book?

Still in his tree.

"Holly - what happened?"

"I set it," she said through chattering teeth, "on fire."

Book climbed down and wrapped her up in his arms and tried to get warmth into her extremities. The tree had been *so cold* - Her finger was bleeding, where the tree had taken the splinter and a chunk of flesh with it. She leaned on Book.

"Do *not* false-sleep on me," he hissed. "Drowse a -"

"They're dead. Except one. We need it or I'd have given it my burn and my frostbite and -" She hiccuped.

"I see two moving around."

"We have to go home."

"Yes. Drowse a mouse and give it your injuries so you can walk. You'll slow us down if I carry you and Crystal's going to have to take over sooner or later."

Where's Tiag? wondered Crystal.

"Where's Tiag?" Holly asked for her.

"Not far, I think. She'll catch up. I can drowse *her* if I have to."

Holly nodded and reached with creaking frigid joints for the mouse cage. Book had to open it for her. She tapped one with her bleeding finger and drowsed it and got rid of her injuries and her cold. The mouse died under her hand and she released a held breath.

"Better?" asked Book.

"Yeah. We need to go home. *Tiag! Tiag -* "

A distant bark.

That was good enough for Holly. She turned rimward and started walking.

"We didn't get any treasure," Holly said.

"Nope," agreed Book.

"And I'm going to have a hell of a time convincing any of you to come out again."

"Next time you might not be the one who gets hurt. If the demon had touched you -"

Or if it'd treed Book - he knows how demons work but he can't troport as well, put in Crystal. Lightning even worse!

"Well," sighed Holly. "We had an adventure, I guess."

They walked. Eventually Crystal came forward. Book noted the change in his sisters' posture but didn't say anything. Tiag caught up and slept in Crystal's arms.

They went home, nervously trading off the last mouse until they could buy more past the Barricade, following a high white rimward sun.

Double, Double

This story was inspired by a [Tumblr post](#). If you like it, I also have [other stories](#), although most of them are not inspired by Tumblr posts.

"There's something I have to tell you... I really should have told you before," she said, wringing her hands. "It's... it's about the baby."

"What about her?" he asked.

"Well - well, when I was a girl -"

This was backwards. Completely backwards. Forget dramatic timing. I opened the door and swept in.

"Witch!" the father exclaimed.

"...That's not my witch," said the mother.

"You had a witch, too? I had to promise her -" he said, pointing at me, "the baby - darling, I didn't realize she'd collect, I didn't think she could possibly really want the baby, I thought she was trying to frighten me -"

"But - but I had a witch - a different witch -"

"Oh, both of you shut up," I growled. " Yes , I'm actually collecting, what would I have let you get away with my singing roses for if you had nothing I wanted? I could have kept you for a pet or a statue, and instead I'm taking the child. The other witch has apparently declined to appear -"

"I most certainly have not!" exclaimed a fourth voice behind me. "Goodness, this is a mess, isn't it? D'you suppose that you could just relinquish your claim - after all, surely the mother's right is stronger than the father's, what with the three quarters of a year involved in the baby-making and such - I'll trade you a singing rosebush if that's what your business is about? I haven't got one but I know a -"

"Oh, nightshade," I hissed. "I don't want another rosebush, I have enough rosebushes at this time, the man stole a few cuttings *years* ago. I want the *baby*."

"Well, so do I, and I've been promised it just the same if not better. Is it a boy or a girl, dear?" the newcomer asked the mother.

"...Girl," whimpered the mother.

"Well, the little munchkin is clearly not staying here, whatever she's doing," the other witch said. She was younger than me, by at least a few years, no gray in her dark gold hair, dressed scarcely more like a witch than a milkmaid in dusty rose, no hat, no robes over the dress. She made a preposterous figure and I would have said she was no witch at all if the mother of the child didn't seem to recognize her. "We'll go figure this out somewhere besides your front hall, shall we? And you can get on with having another one without quite such a mess of owings on it."

"If you'd settle for the secondborn," I suggested.

"No, no, it'd never work," said the other witch. "Letting alone the possibility that they never want to repeat the process! *You're* more than welcome to wait -"

"Look here, I made my deal when the boy was twelve, I certainly have prior claim, she's got to be five years younger than he is -"

"And she's the one who carried the babe, isn't she, it's hardly my fault that this boy paid more than ten minutes' attention to her and

you were able to track them down!"

"Weren't you going to have this argument somewhere else," said the father weakly. Probably hoping we'd duel, kill each other, and leave the little family in peace, bargain or no bargain.

"If you think I'm going to let *you* carry off the child -" I began.

"You can hold her, but I'm not letting you out of my sight," the other witch said. "Go on then."

I rolled my eyes and scooped up the infant out of the cradle. And promptly dropped a smoke globe, which brought me straight home. If she was fool enough to let me be the one to lay hands on the contested baby, so be it -

And she was standing in my living room.

"Tut, tut, aren't we impolite. We haven't resolved the question. Oh, this place is nice, isn't it?"

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"I'm a *witch* ."

"So the hell am I -"

"Language! There's little ears about!" cooed the intruder.

"You still seem under the impression that you're going to have any say in what happens to the owner of those little ears. You may have followed me home, but now you're in my domain -"

"Yes, mind your hospitality obligations."

"I didn't invite you in!"

"Of course you did."

I went back over the sequence of events and - yes, I sort of had. Implicit agreement to the rules of engagement that included continuing our little custody battle somewhere else. She'd let me choose the ground, and then followed me right to it. I should have gone somewhere else.

"Look," I said, "I *need* this baby. I don't have any others lined up, I want to turn her into my apprentice, and the sidereal arrangements I need to seal the deal are only coming up once in the next thirty years, *six months from now*, too soon to trawl the continent for needy pregnant peasants. What would it take to get you to go away?"

"I'm not going away," said the other witch.

"You -"

"Look, let's do this civilly. I'm Millicent. What's your name?"

I looked up at the ceiling. I needed to string some more garlic. The baby fussed in my arms and I started swaying to soothe her.

"Orawne. What do you even want her for?"

"Same thing. I haven't got a time limit, but I do have to stick to the first child I pick. I'm not giving her up any more than you are."

"Oh, for heaven's sake -"

"But I can share."

I stared at Millicent.

"You can share?"

"I can. Look, I haven't got a permanent residence at the moment -"

"You were going to raise a baby apprentice while homeless?" I exclaimed.

"While nomadic, thank you, and with plenty of people who have roofs and owe favors! But you've got lots of room. I'll take a spare bed and save you childrearing time and she can learn both sorts of witching."

"You're mad. You're completely -"

"I bake."

"I'm sure you do, but -"

"I will do *all* of the laundry." This with a significant look at the baby in my arms.

"Upstairs, first door on your left," I sighed. "I keep early hours, don't clatter around after nine in the evening unless the baby needs something."

"Thank you, Orawne," smiled Millicent.

"Don't mention it," I growled.

"We're going to need to name her," she said.

"Vercari."

" I was thinking Linda."

"What in the world kind of witch is named *Linda* ? For that matter, what kind of witch name is *Millicent* ?" I said.

"Oh, I come from a long line of witches with ordinary names. I'll settle for middle name placement if you'll let her switch what she goes by later should she like to."

"Vercari Linda," I mused.

"Oh, and I must insist on using my last name. Apprentice reasons."

"...Vercari Linda what, then?"

"Murk. Acceptably witchy?"

"Yes. Fine. Whatever."

"We're going to get along famously, Orawne, I just know it," beamed Millicent.

She did the laundry. She made pie. Vercari liked the milky potion she fixed up better than mine. Meanwhile, I made preparations for what I was going to need to properly dedicate the baby as my apprentice - Millicent didn't seem to need any such ritual, and it made me nervous about whether mine would take, properly, with a claim on her like that. But it *was* too late to trawl the continent for peasants willing to bargain away their imminent children. It was hard enough to find someone who'd make the promise when they *weren't* already expecting.

"Honestly, what *were* you planning to do with a baby and all this work to do?" Millicent asked, rocking Vercari while I made straw figurines to burn.

"Not sleep much," I muttered.

"Do you even like babies?"

"They're all right. I won't be able to teach her much until she's four or so, maybe three if she's precocious. She's still cute, just - this isn't the part I was planning for as much."

"I'll have a bit of a head start, then, I have a rattle that she'll be able to get some use out of soon, not to accomplish much, just to train the right reflexes."

"How soon?" I asked. Straw crunched in my hand.

"After you've dedicated her. Don't *worry*, Orawne, I'm not going to kidnap her out from under you, we agreed on sharing, didn't we? I keep my promises."

"She likes you more. She -"

"I hold her more. In six months you'll be done with your straw... things... and you'll -"

"Watch her wave around your magic rattle. What kind of magic do you do, anyhow?"

"I don't know if the tradition strictly has a name. I'm from the westlands, anyway."

"And in the westlands you can follow other witches' smoke globes and make magic rattles to train babies' reflexes when they're less than a year old and make better potions?"

"But I couldn't actually *use* a smoke globe, let alone make one," countered Millicent. "We're differently specialized, I'm hardly omnipotent."

"Still."

"The baby will have both kinds," Millicent smiled.

"... *That's* why you were willing to share, is it? And to do all the laundry to get it done amicably. You want your apprentice to be two kinds of witch."

"Your apprentice too. And splitting the childcare doesn't hurt. I get up in the evening and you get up in the morning when she's crying, I do the cooking and the laundry but you're still giving her baths -"

"I have to dunk her in herb water anyway. It just makes sense."

"Are you saying you'll stop giving her baths when she's six months old?"

"Well, no."

"There you go."

Vercari was, as babies go, fairly ordinary. She developed brown hair, when she grew any at all - Millicent commented that it looked like mine, though mine was half gone gray from some combination of age and potion exposure - and her eyes stayed blue even past the point where they'd have darkened if they were going to. Like Millicent's. One could almost imagine that she was in fact our baby, despite the fact that this was on several levels impossible.

Millicent looked over the text of my dedication ritual once I'd written it out with all the names and star signs and so on filled in.

"This says that you're giving her to the stars and taking her from the moon. What's that supposed to mean?"

I looked up. "What does it *sound* like?"

"I don't know, I don't touch astronomical mumbo-jumbo. What does it mean?"

Well, it wasn't like Millicent would be able to use any of my spells even if I told her, since no one had dedicated *her* as an appropriately astronomical mumbo-jumboed apprentice when she was little. "If Vercari was a boy I'd be taking him from the sun instead, does that help?"

"...No?"

"... *My* kind of witch can't have children. Can *yours* ? What are you doing getting them from mundanes, if you could just have the homemade kind?"

"My kind of witch can," said Millicent softly. "I can't."

"Oh."

"But Vercari won't be able to?"

"No. Unless you have a way of giving her *back* to the moon after she's taken what she needs from the stars."

"Well, I can see if there's something to be done, anyway."

"So, wait - Millicent - were you homemade or taken?"

"Homemade, if that's what you call it. There's entire witch villages in the westlands."

"And you're out here with a half-share in my taken baby because the moon wouldn't have you to begin with."

"If that's how you want to put it." She didn't sound like she wanted to discuss it.

I let it drop.

"Aside from the rattle to - train her reflexes - what is it you're going to be doing with her?" I asked, while I was feeding Vercari milky potion and Millicent was rolling out biscuit dough.

"Well, the rattle will be it for about a year, but then simple illusions are next. Then since she's a firstborn she can have a familiar,

probably I'll find her a kitten or a fox pup; I don't have a familiar because I have an older brother."

"What are they for?"

"They aren't exactly for anything. Well, status symbols, if you're in a witch village, but they aren't much practical use. Don't you have anything just for fun?"

Garden and chickens for food and potion ingredients, telescope for stargazing and divination, a self-operating spinning wheel and loom to make my own robes and have something to trade to those mundanes who didn't do anything that gave me leave to extort them, nothing really for *fun* . "No."

"Poor Orawne. Who taught you, anyway?"

"She died. Dueling, five years ago. I wouldn't have called her fun. I had a decent enough childhood, anyway."

"Took you when you were a baby?"

"I was two, actually, and she bought me outright. Story was that my mother was in a bind when my father died."

"And your mundane mother named you 'Orawne', did she?"

"I presume not, but I can't remember what it was instead. I like my name. I wouldn't want to be called *Millicent* ."

"I like my name too," said Millicent tartly.

"Much good may it do you. While you're looking for a way to let the moon have her back one day maybe I'll look for a way to make her familiar able earn its keep, shall I?"

"Lest she grow up complaining 'Orawne doesn't understand the point of my dearest bestest friend!', yes, by all means, work out a spell to

teach cats to read or serve as divinatory focuses or whatever it is you'd have one do."

"You think Vercari's going to grow up calling me 'Orawne', do you?"

"As opposed to?"

"Mother."

Millicent blinked at me.

"There are two of us," she pointed out.

"We are in my house, and the stars will have her before you give her that magic rattle -"

"So I suppose," Millicent interrupted, "that I'll be Mummy or something like that, and that should be clear enough when she's screaming for one or the other across the garden."

"Oh. All right."

"Hear that, Vercari dear, Mother says I'm Mummy and she can have the stiff formal name," cooed Millicent.

I snorted.

Millicent finished painting egg onto the last circle of dough and put the biscuits in the oven.

I was stitching together a little dress for Vercari, so that Millicent could more easily keep up with the laundry and because it was a break from making straw things to burn. Millicent poked her head into the sewing room.

"What are *you* going to start teaching her, when she's four or what have you?"

"Constellations. She'll have to learn to read, too. Potionmaking has to wait for good motor control."

"But what do you *do* with the constellations?"

"Learn to interpret them. Much easier to make enchanted objects if you know when to do it, though actually artificing will have to come later, again."

"Oh! The spinning wheel and loom are working by themselves?"

"Of course they are. You didn't think I was operating them myself all day long, did you?"

"I did," admitted Millicent. "I was very impressed."

I snorted. "I do most of my magic with magic things. And some potions."

"I suppose that suits you."

"Better than having a pointless animal following me around and following someone else's smoke globe into their house. And making illusions."

"Illusions can be very useful if you know how to use them. And obviously so can following certain witches home."

"Obviously," I said. "What were you planning to do if I'd been living with someone?"

"Does your kind of witch even get married?"

"Not to anyone who assumes that pregnancy is the intended outcome," I said dryly. "But I could have had a lover or a co-apprentice I was living with or another taken child - though if I'd already taken one I'd have been less insistent about this one, I suppose - or could have still been living with my teacher."

"I cannot a bit imagine you with a lover. You'd chase him off with a stick."

" *Him ?*"

Millicent blinked at me, and then either Vercari made a noise or she decided of her own accord to flee the room.

"I was married once," Millicent told me, while I was giving Vercari her bath.

"Oh, I'd been assuming you found out the moon wouldn't have you by magic."

"I don't even know how I'd do that by magic. No."

"Is that why you aren't married anymore?"

"Well, it's more complicated than - yes. It is."

"More fool him. You make very good scones."

Millicent laughed, and I almost smiled.

"He didn't want to go to the trouble of taking a baby. It's a little frowned on, in the westlands, taking babies."

"If you can homemake them I suppose it would seem like a lot of hassle, and unnecessarily antagonize the mundanes, who never seem to think ahead how they'll feel about the deals when they come due..."

"Yes, exactly."

"But if you *can't* homemake them -"

"Well, *he* can. He has done. Our handfast expired and he married someone else and they have a baby and another on the way. My brother wrote."

"You've been receiving mail at my house?"

"I live here, don't I?"

"I suppose."

"I told my brother about Vercari Linda. He might come visit."

" *Might* he."

"I can introduce them out in the front garden if you don't want him past the threshold."

" *Can* you."

"...If you don't mind, Orawne, I would like to introduce our daughter to her uncle, at some point, and later grandparents too, and if you do mind, I would still like it and will still try to manage it."

I rinsed off the baby. "Fine."

"Thank you."

" *If*," I continued, "you use the fancy illusion magic to make it at least tricky and ideally impossible for any of these - people - to find my house without express invitations. I don't want the place crawling with - people."

"Oh! Oh, of course - they wouldn't show up unexpectedly anyway, but if - yes, certainly, I'll make the whole place look like a bit of forest and if they show up when I'm not expecting them they'll get lost, will that do?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Vercari was all dried off. I threw the towel at Millicent's head and fetched the baby's nightdress.

When we'd had Vercari for a month and four days, Millicent's brother came by. He didn't dress any more like a witch than she did, although instead of her favored pink dresses he seemed to prefer to garb himself like a mundane merchant tinker or something, all over pockets and straps and dangling tools and herbs like he didn't know how to enchant a belt pouch. Perhaps he didn't, at that. He held the baby, he had trouble pronouncing her first name, he wanted to know who exactly I was, he found the situation with the conflicting claims on her very funny, he hugged his sister, he left. It was in all relatively painless.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Millicent asked, leading me through her illusion trees and managing to open the front door out of thin air. I rather liked the effect. Very secluded.

"We are all still alive," I acknowledged.

"Do you really have no friends or family at all?"

"Besides you and Vercari?"

"Yes," she said, turning a little pink. "Besides."

I shrugged. "There are people I talk to regularly in the nearest towns who buy my fabric or extra zucchini. People don't *visit*."

"I must be a terrible lifestyle disruption."

"You help with Vercari. You bake. You do the laundry. I don't mind you."

"Good."

"Yes, quite."

"I wouldn't want you to mind me."

"Yes, that was clearly in the forefront of your mind when you originally proposed moving in to resolve our dispute, the sincere hope that I would not mind you -"

"I needed Vercari. I can have more than one child and teach them all but if I ever *give up* a child I meant to keep I can't claim any more. But it's been - a while since then."

"And you did wheedle your way in offering pastry and chore details. I am not complaining," I said.

"Good."

"Of course."

"It's only - I wouldn't like it if getting Vercari meant antagonizing you. I'd rather we all - fit neatly."

"Well, I'm certainly not going to kick you out because the moon won't have you or some such nonsense," I said, putting Vercari down for a nap.

"Earlier," said Millicent, "the other week, you said -"

"Yes?"

"Never mind."

"Did I say something that had you thinking we were not fitting neatly...?"

Millicent shook her head. "Never mind."

"If you insist." I prodded the fireplace, determined that it didn't need another log, and went to where I was accumulating my pile of straw things.

"I mean it's a *general* question, and I wouldn't want to be misinterpreted."

"And?"

"Well, when I was saying I couldn't picture you with a lover..."

"Eh, you were probably right. I don't meet people, let alone attract them."

"And you said, '*Him?*'"

"I have no intention of trying to homemake babies. It sounds unappealing even if I could."

"But it doesn't necessarily follow that..."

"That what?"

"I - don't know."

"Then I can hardly answer your general question, can I."

Millicent fussed with her hair. "In my village what with the taking of babies so out of fashion and -"

"I'm not going to render Vercari interested in acquiring lady lovers as an adult if she weren't already heading that way," I said, question suddenly clicking. "It depends on the individual witch. My teacher dated men, when she dated anyone at all. I'm just, individually, fortunate that I don't find myself a mundane expected to marry some - male, for mundane reasons."

"...Oh," said Millicent, sounding dissatisfied with this answer.

"I don't even know how I'd go about doing such a thing on *purpose*," I went on. "It would be much harder than changing her hair color or something."

"I wouldn't know either... I like her hair color. Leave it."

"I wasn't planning to change it."

"Good."

"Mm-hm."

I made straw things. Millicent started a chicken pot pie.

"Orawne?"

"Mm?"

"Nothing."

"All right."

"Her name is growing on me," Millicent said.

"I thought about it for a long time. It would have been Corlesen if she'd been a boy," I said. I was trying Millicent's milky potion recipe. It was *like* mine, but the ratios were different. Our general potionmaking seemed similar enough that I ought to be able to copy it.

"What do you think of 'Linda', now?"

"It's all right for a middle name. It still isn't very witchy. Maybe it's witchy for the westlands."

"And 'Millicent'?"

"Same thing. I suppose the sound of it would be all right if mundanes didn't use it."

"My parents sometimes call me Lissy."

"If they were going to call you Lissy why did they name you Millicent?"

"It's a nickname. You've heard of those, haven't you?"

"Yes. They just don't make a lot of sense."

"It's for - layers of closeness. The people in town call me Miss Murk, you call me Millicent, my parents call me Lissy."

"Are you saying you want me to call you Miss Murk?"

"No. But you could call me Lissy."

I considered this.

"Lissy," I said.

"Yes?"

"Just trying it out."

"And?"

"I suppose it makes sense."

"Can I help you make the straw things?" Lissy asked.

"I'm... not actually sure," I said. "If we were both my kind of witch and we'd taken Vercari together you could."

"What happens if I can't after all?"

"Then yours won't burn when the time comes, and the fire might not be high enough."

"Is there a way to find out? Your fingers look like they hurt."

"A little. I could check the stars, see if they have anything to say about it."

"I'd like to help," Lissy said earnestly.

"You are helping. You do the laundry, you cook, you mind Vercari while I'm making them."

"But right now the laundry is done and there's meatballs in the oven and Vercari's asleep."

"I'll go have a look at the sky, if you're that bored."

"It's not boredom. Just - it looks uncomfortable, doing that many of them. And you seem worried about the deadline, sometimes."

"I have to wait thirty years if I miss it. And I wouldn't have Vercari anymore, would I?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"If I didn't dedicate her? Wouldn't you whisk her away to your little westlands village with my claim expired?"

" *No*, " exclaimed Lissy. "I mean, wouldn't you still want her - don't you like her?"

"Yes, but -"

"But nothing, I wouldn't take her from you even if she weren't going to - belong to the stars too. You aren't the stars."

"So in this scenario you and Vercari would go on living here and she'd be a westlands kind of witch, complete with rattle and pointless animal and charming illusions, and I'd be...?"

"Her mother."

"...All right. But I want to make the deadline regardless."

"Of course. Go check."

I went up to the balcony with my telescope and searched the sky. It had been a while since I'd divined anything, too busy with preparations of straw things and dedication ritual details.

I slipped into meditative focus, and swung the telescope around to focus on different constellations until the answer came to me.

I went back down and took Lissy's hands in mine and showed her how to weave the simplest kind of straw thing.

She beamed at me.

With Lissy's help the straw things were all made by the time Vercari was four months old. There was suddenly a lot more time, then, although Vercari could fill it pretty effectively, wanting to be fed or walked around or changed.

Sometimes, of course, the baby slept.

"Orawne?"

"Yes?"

"When did you know that if you were ever going to have a lover it would be a woman?"

"I don't think it even crossed my mind till I was, oh, nineteen, to list characteristics for such an improbable person, I just didn't meet enough people... once it occurred to me to ask myself the question, it was obvious. Why?"

Lissy beat the eggs in her mixing bowl harder.

"Lissy?"

"Mm?"

"You were married for reasons other than the desire for a homemade baby, weren't you? I'd hope?"

"Oh. Yes. I liked him, before he - before. Yes."

"I suppose if you hadn't, the expiration of the handfasting would be a mercy..."

"I don't think I'm quite - look - with your kind of witches no one cares, right? Since the moon won't have you it doesn't matter?"

"Right."

"So you might have heard of - is there anyone who likes both?"

"Sure. My teacher's co-prentice, he did, she told me."

"Okay."

"Are you worrying about Vercari when she grows up, again? I guess it might matter if you find out how to give her back to the moon without undoing her star gift."

"It really doesn't matter to me if she has no apprentices or makes them or takes them or whatever she likes," Millicent said.

"Good, because again, I can't change who she'd want to bring up or not bring up her own apprentices with."

"I don't expect you to."

"What's for dinner?"

"Omelettes. Orawne?"

"Yes?"

Lissy didn't go on.

"Lissy, what *is* it?"

"I - it's -"

"Is it about Vercari...?"

"No."

"Have I been waking you up earlier than you like in the mornings? Are you out of leavening? Is your entire extended family going to descend on my house tomorrow morning -"

"No, no, no -"

"Are you having second thoughts about staying here -"

"No!"

"I'm not going to *guess*, apparently, Lissy."

Lissy poured the eggs into the pan. They hissed.

"I'm afraid," she said. "That you won't react well - that if you react badly enough you'll want me to leave."

"Nightshade, Lissy, if it's *that* bad - what do you want me to do, promise that you can borrow Vercari to teach her on alternate days no matter what you say?"

Lissy nudged the edge of the incipient omelette with her turner. Apparently it wasn't ready to have whatever was next befall it yet. "Maybe promise that she won't be a - a pawn, if it comes to that."

"I'll promise I'll put her welfare first. I want a doubly witched apprentice as much as you do. Besides, you already told *me* that if I missed her deadline you'd stay here with her."

"Okay. Thank you."

"...And?"

"I'm still afraid."

"I'm a witch, not a monster."

Lissy sighed. She sprinkled cheese onto the omelette.

"Look, Lissy, whatever this is, is obviously important. Can I *help*?"

"I like you," she blurted. "I might be in love with you."

And then she turned away and folded the omelette, but not before I watched her cheeks turn beet red.

I waited politely until she slid the omelette onto a plate before I kissed her.

We heaped the straw things around the firebreak around the basket.

I took Vercari from the moon, which was turned away new; I burned the straw around her and when it was consumed and the air was smoky and dark I read the rest of her dedication, and our eyes

adjusted, and she gazed up at the stars until one dislodged itself from the sky and fell and fell and fell and landed, tiny and cool and still bright, in her hand. It winked out, leaving only a faint white mark.

"Is that it?" Lissy murmured beside me.

"That's it," I said, stepping over the circle of straw ash to scoop up our child from her basket. "The star is hers, now. If you work out a way to make the moon take her back it won't leave her regardless, I think."

"I think I'll be able to figure something out," Lissy said, and she stroked Vercari's hair and then leaned over her and kissed me.

"Mother, Mother!"

"Yes, Vercari?"

"Cousin says stars don't do the star things."

"Cousin is only one kind of witch, Vercari. He doesn't know about the star things."

"But he said I lied!"

"Well, he's not very well educated, then, is he?"

"When I have apprentices they will know about stars and rattles."

"Yes, they will. Lucky them!"

"Just like me! Lucky me."

"Mm-hm."

"Where's Mummy?"

"Mummy is talking to her brother. If you go find her maybe she'll tell your cousin's daddy to scold him for saying you lied."

"Okay. Mother?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for star things."

"You're welcome, Vercari."

"Aaaand thank you for the extra Mummy too. Because I like doing pictures too!"

"You're *very* welcome, Vercari."

Strax

"You wouldn't think it would be hard to diagnose," said the woman whose nametag read *Thalia* . High skeptical flutes cascaded around her, but she was automatically speaking up so we could hear her over them.

"We live in this old apartment with thin walls, we thought it was the air conditioner or something for the longest time - even after it resolved into melodies we thought it was the neighbor's stereo," my wife told her. And then we'd spent a month where I thought we were having shared hallucinations and Gail thought our daughter was cursed. Awareness campaigns are usually pointless, but we needed one - not that we'd never heard about kids emitting music. It just didn't show up in respectable sources for too long.

"What, you never took her outside?" Thalia asked. Violins? Violas? I should have paid more attention in music appreciation.

"We took her outs-" Gail composed herself. "The park near our place is close to the road. People drive by with their windows open and stereos turned up all the time. There are mockingbirds. We didn't *know* , but now we do."

"You might want to consider changing her name. People are going to think it's a nasty joke you made about her music, around here," Thalia advised.

"Just write *Mel* , on her nametag," I suggested. "We usually call her that anyway. Maybe when she's older she'll change it to Melanie or Melinda or something... Do you get jokes about being named after the wrong muse -"

"Constantly," said Thalia sharply, accompanied by growling low organ notes, and she wrote *Mel Thomas* on a nametag and stuck it to Melody's overalls. Gail had already written one for her and one for me.

"Sorry," I said, picking up Mel. I couldn't quite tell where Thalia's music ended and my daughter's began; they were close enough to cooperate. It was eerie that this stranger - this not particularly friendly stranger - was able to interact with my child on a level that I never would. Even if it was all unconscious drumbeats and chimes.

Mel didn't seem to find it eerie. She was being quiet as a mouse apart from the entwined songs, beaming.

"Well, enjoy the Harmony Convention, here are your earplugs if you need them but that's your own business, *never* ask a strax to quiet down here, that's an ejection offense if they tell security - the rest of that sort of thing is on this protocol handout, and err on the side of caution, this is our space, not yours, you're only here for Mel's sake - here's a map of the convention center, and here's the events schedule. Oh, and you get a pen."

The pen was green and said *I am effortlessly talented!* There were other designs in the box - *No awkward silences* and *Automatic lullaby* and *Play it again, Sam* and *There's a song in my heart* and others I couldn't read without rummaging. I considered rummaging, but instead I tucked the pen into Mel's overalls pocket and said, "Thanks."

"Let me see the protocol handout," said Gail, and I handed it over, scanning the events list.

"Is it anything more than - common sense, we are guests, etcetera?" I asked her, putting Mel down and taking her pen back so I could circle interesting panels. There was a parenting one.

"Lots," Gail frowned. "It might be easier to just - not interact with anyone - how am I supposed to remember that it's impolite to speak while three or more strax are in unison? *Why* is it impolite to speak when - is there even a reason for - what would we do if we didn't take choir in high school and know what *unison* means, what then?"

"Is it impolite to ask what unison means?"

"Uh... might fall under *don't assume strax know a lot about music theory* . But why wouldn't they?"

"They might not be welcome in the classes, considering," I pointed out.

" *Zero tolerance policy for advocating strax-exclusive social structure* ," said Gail. "Trade you."

I gave her the events list. I took the protocol sheet. We were moving into the crowded main hall, now; there were a couple of food stands, and some people with petitions manning booths, and exhibits, and - yep, there was a live band, which was doing a fairly impressive job of keeping the cacophany organized. Everybody was in the same key, at least, snapping to jaunty major chords now and then when the band held a long note only to dissolve into conflicting descants after a second or two.

Melody's music was in there somewhere and I had no idea how to pick it out. I didn't know if anybody could.

Never ask a strax to quiet down. We're all very tired of requests for Freebird and Wonderwall and Happy Birthday. Please do not play any low-definition recorded music, even through headphones, while at the convention, except in your private hotel room. High-def is permissible with headphones, and singing and live instrument playing permissible in the rooms marked "6" on your map -

"Daddy! Mommy!" exclaimed Mel. I could barely hear her. She was pointing at one of the candy stalls. I wondered if we should have waited until she was old enough to, say, start school, before driving five hundred miles to bring her someplace she could meet more strax. There was a meetup in our hometown, but it was very strictly strax only and we didn't have any strax friends to escort Mel; the Harmony Convention might have a laundry list of rules, but at least "no normal people" wasn't one of them.

Non-strax are not 'normal', they're just common, reprimanded the protocol sheet.

Gail bought Mel a candy apple, probably on the hope that at least some of the apple would go down the hatch with the caramel and the chocolate. I couldn't tell in the din if the candy apple salesman was a strax or just an opportunistic vendor.

Gail said something.

"What?" I asked.

"I said, if we're going to the one on strax in public places, we should start looking for the room now!"

"Do you want to go to that one?"

"What?"

I just nodded.

Gail followed the map; I held Mel's hand and went after her through the crowd. Mel was already sticky.

It was a little bit quieter in the panel room. We found seats halfway back, Mel happy with her snack between us. The live music didn't carry this far - I could still hear the swell of the crowd's music following it through the door, but it was no longer swaying Mel or

the handful of people who were also this early to the session. There was music piped in, though, presumably high-def, whispering in through speakers at the front of the room. I didn't really understand how strax cooperative music worked, but whoever had set this up did; everything was, not quiet, but *smooth*, drifting slowly and slidily from tone to tone such that if someone spoke up and enunciated clearly I'd expect to be able to figure out what they were saying. With any luck they were also going to make use of the projector, though.

"My music is happy," said Mel.

"We *need* to get one of those stereos," Gail murmured in my ear over her head. "Skip both our birthday presents, maybe ask my mom -"

"We'll talk about it later," I murmured, very much aware that we'd probably sound like some kind of fascists to this crowd if we mentioned that we liked the idea of soothing Mel's music to gentle Enya-like whispers when we wanted to sleep, or if we ever had another baby and the *baby* needed to sleep -

The seats filled up; the panelists filed in, were introduced, and started taking questions. The projector was indeed turned on, and there was someone at a keyboard in the corner, typing *very* fast whenever someone said something that didn't match up to a prepared slide. I had the impression that everyone we were privileged to hear speak today was somebody big in the strax community, that everybody in the room recognized their names and could have personally written odes to their great deeds except for me, Gail, and Mel.

It was pretty clear about three questions in that we ought not to have come to this. All the politics and history were way over our four-year-old's head, and it wasn't remotely tailored for me or Gail - I'd been vaguely imagining that this would be, say, "how to politely

bring up relevant acts of Congress if turned away from the library" or "which movie theaters will let you in to see the latest Pixar offering", but it was not. I would have needed to read a few more books than I knew *existed* about this topic to understand anything that went on, and didn't have an excuse to slide out of the row with wife and child to find something else to do. Could the people around us tell that Mel was the only strax in the family? Even if they didn't have a particular sense for it that would probably be the only reason to bring a preschooler, wouldn't it? I stayed put, and listened, and re-read all the panel titles. (I tried to think of a way for the parenting one to be this far off the mark, but even if it was intended for strax parents with non-strax children, or something, it would probably still address the quandary of how to bring the matter to the attention of school principals, if only for the purposes of PTA meetings.)

At least Mel was occupied with the candy apple. Gail, thinking along the same lines as me, took the stick with the apple core on it from her when it was denuded of food, picked Mel up with the other arm, and shot me a look as she made for the trash can near the door. I followed her, she discarded the stick, and we kept going, until we found a nook with water fountains and Gail started rinsing off Mel's sticky fingers.

"We are completely lost," said Gail, putting Mel down again with this task adequately handled. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this. We drove hundreds of miles for that?"

"There's still the - parenting panel," I said. "And Mel seems to like it."

She did. She'd absentmindedly eaten her entire apple when usually she'd have stopped at the point where she realized it wasn't peeled under the candy. She was doing a little dance. She was smiling.

Her music was happy.

"We should have tried harder to get that meetup organizer to let at least one of us sit in," Gail said. "They ought to understand that Mel can't just be dropped off on her own -"

"They didn't expect us to drop her off on her own. They expected us to have strax friends," I sighed. "Who would babysit."

"How are we supposed to make strax friends? Even if we meet someone here, even if we can hear them talking, they'll probably turn out to live hours away. It would have been better to put the gas money towards the fancy special stereo, anyway. And some of that - gentling music. When she's - twelve, thirteen, then we could drop her off at things like the meetups, why does she need all this political junk this young?"

"If the large concentration of people like her without the political junk was on offer I'd have gone for that," I said. "It's probably not all political junk. I don't believe literally every strax carries a soapbox around; they can't, can they? Maybe there's more kids here, let's walk around."

"And then she'll make friends and be miserable when they turn out to live in Alaska and we don't have a high-def microphone to let them *play* over the phone," muttered Gail, barely audible over ululating orchestral follow-ons to the band. "But sure."

Mel went peaceably - no love lost between her and the panel - and we wandered. I signed a couple of the petitions - bolster the protection of this Act in that State, public subsidy for the fancy audio equipment *yes please* - banning volume conditioning?

"Uh," I said, trying to figure out how to draw away from that booth without violating any rules on the protocol list. "No thank you."

"Are you volume-conditioning that innocent little girl?" hissed the man with the petition.

"Listen, I don't want to sign your petition, that's all."

Gail scooped up Mel and held her, like she thought the man would take our kid away.

"Are you?" he demanded. "Does she get treats if she can pretend to be like *you* for a minute, two, three, keep it under forty decibels for an hour and she gets a *prize*? Time-out if there's brass and drums while you don't want to turn on the *closed captions*? What are you doing to her?"

"Listen -"

"No, *you* listen, you listen to your *child*, that girl is a *gift* and if you're trying to -"

"We *don't*! But if we were in a more delicate housing situation or if we were light sleepers -"

"If you're not trying to train her out of her music then sign the petition! You owe it to her!"

"No thank you -"

Gail was pulling on my elbow; I let her take me away rather than continue trying to get the guy to *allow* me to depart. He didn't chase me.

"Just - don't look like the kind of person who signs petitions," Gail said in my ear over harps and harpsichords and a pennywhistle. "It's like giving money to beggars."

"One of them was for equipment subsidy. We'd *like* that."

"A petition's not going to make it happen. Look, the real point of being here is for Mel's music to come out to play, right? Let's find

one of the smaller rooms with instruments and singing and - let her play."

There were four rooms on the map marked *6 - Improvisational Live Music Venues* . (Between *5 - Concessions* and *7 - Record Points of Sale* . Of all the complaints I had about this convention, its crisply organized map was not one of them.) We headed to the nearest room; empty at the moment. The next had an old man with a guitar and some people sitting in a circle of beanbags around him, most of them with their eyes closed, music cooperating. We went into that one and sat Mel on a beanbag and stood in the corner ourselves.

She seemed to know what to do, if there was any matter of knowing instead of it just all happening by itself around her. I still couldn't pick out her own tune when it was blending. It itched at me; it was like looking at a group photo and not being able to find her face. Maybe she'd be more distinctive if we'd brought her up around throat singing and yodeling and birdcalls instead of my pop and classical and Gail's baroque and Cirque du Soleil. And our mutual blues. We hadn't had any music on in the house except Mel's since we'd figured out what was making the baby cry, two years before we knew *why* . We left Mel with my sister or Gail's mother when we wanted to go to a concert. Because she was four. Because she was a strax. Both.

It seemed impolite - though there was nothing about it on the protocol sheet - to speak in this room, while they were doing what they were doing with the guitar. I found an old receipt in my pocket and Mel's pen and wrote, *You okay here if I go look around for ~20min?*

Gail nodded.

I squeezed her hand and patted Mel with her happy music on the head and slipped out the door with the event list.

Strax in the media. Strax history - what, more of it? Separate from what we'd stumbled into in the first panel? (Subtitle: *It's short for "soundtracks"!*) Strax around the world. Strax community organization.

I headed for that last one. I'd only be a minute late.

I found a seat close to the door, ready to bolt if "community organization" turned out to mean "picketing and writing letters to your representative" rather than "forming smaller gatherings than the Harmony Convention", but the slide up showed happy news. List of cities in the U.S. and Canada with regular strax meetups - the ones whose leaders were present on the panel today were bolded -

And my city was in big black letters.

Yep, I recognized the ginger guy on the left. And he recognized me too.

"I'm going to interrupt you there," he said to the person next to him, who was in the middle of um-ing about a question that had been asked before I came in. "I recognize this fellow and he's relevant to the topic. Mr. Thomas?"

Damn, damn. "Mr. Cole," I acknowledged.

"Right. We were just talking about different meetup groups' choices to include non-strax; if I recall correctly you took it amiss that my policy is not to admit you."

I swallowed. "Our daughter is four," I said, trying not to sound defensive.

"And that's one of the reasons some meetups admit non-strax, so they can escort their young children. There's tradeoffs to be made, obviously -" He didn't seem to be addressing me specifically anymore; just using me as a springboard to talk about his pet topic.

"Obviously most strax have non-strax parents, so when they're too young to attend meetups alone they can only participate if non-strax supervision is allowed, or if their parents have at least one strax friend who'll take them. But equally obviously, it's important to strax of *any* age - particularly ones in the awkward period where they have to *live* at home but can sometimes go places alone, mid to late teens - to have a retreat from the people who constantly attempt to suppress their talents and consider them annoyances instead of a shared communication tool and plaything -"

He rambled. And rambled. Even the other panelists looked annoyed with him. I looked at my watch; I'd told Gail twenty minutes, I hadn't planned to stay for an entire panel, but Cole had gone and drawn the entire room's attention to me. If I left and the room wasn't actively on fire at the time I'd look like he'd chased me out.

I almost did leave at the twenty-minute mark, but then I found I actually had a question.

Cole called on me. The typist in the corner leaned to hear me better over the cooing high-def music saturating the room with level conversation-compatible croons.

"What *should* non-strax parents of young strax be doing to let them have their - I don't know what to call it, time with other strax, anyway - if they live where we live, or places with community situations like that?"

"Make strax friends," said Cole.

"But -" *there are barely thirty of you in the entire metropolitan area and the only place you concentrate won't let me in.*

"I agree," said the woman next to him before I could continue. "Make the effort, put yourselves out there, take the trouble to demonstrate to the child that you don't find people like her intolerable companions."

"We're -" *here, aren't we?*

"It's not like we're hard to find!" chuckled the guy on the other side of her, winking at the rest of the audience. They laughed; the music burbled.

"The -" protocol sheet says that if you're here for both days and see someone outside listed convention hours outside the center you shouldn't approach them just because they're making music unless their music is inviting you and what does that even mean, does that not apply at home, someone tell me how I can just make my kid's music happy without people looking like they wish our state had laxer gun laws -

"It's going to come down to that," agreed the fourth panelist. "Get to know other strax in the area. If you're here from as far away as Mr. Cole is you're obviously willing to put forth some effort for your child, and some of it's going to be social effort. Maybe bring your child outdoors more often and let people come to you, if you don't know how to close the distance yourself."

"But -" what if everyone who approaches us thinks we're training Mel like she's a puppy to keep her quiet, what if they think we hate our baby, what if they're like that petition guy -

"Next question," said Cole.

I left.

It was probably my imagination that the music snarled at me as the door closed.

When I got back to the "6" room that I'd left Gail and Mel in, they were gone, probably looking to see what had kept me or maybe taking Mel to the bathroom. I had the map; they could have gotten lost whichever they were doing. Great. I started making a circuit of the big room. I paused to look in the other "6" rooms in case they'd

moved to a different one, but no, they weren't with the a capella (...as much as anybody here could be a capella) choir in the one or the lap-harp-and-an-accordion in the other. The first we'd checked, still empty. Ladies' room: line curving from it to the exit, no sign of Gail or Mel standing and waiting, and I hadn't been *that* late. I wished for the hundredth time that I could have afforded to replace my phone when Mel put it in the applesauce jar instead of waiting to ask my sister for one come Christmas.

I found Gail near some kind of photojournalism exhibit that I didn't pause to take in. Gail wasn't looking at it either, she was squinting into the crowd.

She didn't have Mel with her.

"Gail," I said, "where's Melody?"

"I thought she -"

"You didn't think she was with me, I told you I was leaving, I left her with you -"

"And we went looking for you and she said *Daddy* and pulled away from my hand and went tearing off into the crowd, I thought she'd maybe really spotted you, but I couldn't get through -"

"I haven't seen her," I said. "I haven't seen her since I left you in the guitar room."

"Oh, God," breathed Gail. I couldn't even hear her, but I could guess.

"Where *exactly* were you -"

"Hey, guys," said the photojournalist. "You're blocking my -"

"Not now," I told him. "Gail, where exactly were you when -"

"You can't," said the photojournalist, "you can't be in the way of the exhibit entrance -"

" *Shut up!* " Gail shrieked at him. "I was just by that pillar and she went that way -"

The photojournalist looked like she'd slapped him.

Every other strax within shriek-detecting radius looked like she'd slapped him.

The security guard in the convention center uniform looked like he wasn't getting paid enough, but he stalked forward and put his hand on Gail's shoulder. "Ma'am, going to have to ask you to leave."

"My daughter -" Gail began.

"Ejection offense, it was on your protocol sheet, come with me right now, ma'am. Sir, don't you start with me," he told me.

"Our daughter's missing!" I exclaimed, but he didn't seem to understand me over the roaring music.

He had his earplugs in.

" *Find her,* " Gail cried over her shoulder as the guard pulled her away. "I'll be in the car, *find her and we're leaving.* "

I nodded. The convention center was big, but not infinitely big, and if she'd gotten far away from it, well -

It's not like strax are hard to track down -

I tried to find another security guard, but apparently they were *all* placed maximally inconveniently. The photojournalist, when calmed down enough to answer a civil-by-sheer-force-of-will question, said he hadn't seen any four-year-old black girls wearing blue or any other color outfit. The people at the other stationary exhibits nearby

said the same thing. She must have been quick as a wink towards whoever she'd misidentified as me.

I went back towards the entrance where Thalia, named for the wrong muse, had been, but she was gone, replaced by somebody else who also hadn't seen Mel.

Back into the center. Through it in a careful, exhaustive grid -

Past the row of petitioners.

The fellow in favor of banning volume-conditioning didn't say a word to me when I walked by.

How much of my gut feeling was about hating him for shouting at me in public about fictitious mistreatment of my daughter and how much of it was about the potentially relevant fact that he'd chosen that *specific* way to earn my resentment, as opposed to keying my car?

Would someone have *taken* her? Would *he*, or maybe someone who'd heard him and believed him?

Mel wasn't a hiding-prone child. We never found her curled up beneath the sink or under her bed or in the washing machine. I didn't think she'd be under somebody's booth table or tucked into the curtain behind the band. And I'd been all over this convention center twice. And if I had to listen to the music obliviously chortling while my child was missing for another hour I was going to start climbing the walls -

Where the hell was another security guard?

Eyes peeled for another one of those convention center uniforms, I stalked out of the petition booth row, only to bump into Mr. Cole.

"Mr. Thomas," he said, politely enough. "You don't look well."

"Mel's gone missing," I said, "Gail got thrown out, and I can't find security and don't know if the one throwing her out will listen to her, he had earplugs in."

"Missing? For how long?"

"At least half an hour, now, I've been looking - you've seen Mel, would you recognize her if you saw her -?"

"I think so. Not a lot of kids around. You take that half of the convention and I take this one and we meet back here?" he suggested.

"Y- wait. I had an - argument with one of the people with the petitions, back there, earlier, he shouted at me about Mel. I haven't got a speck of proof but -"

Cole nodded. "You want me to talk to him?"

"It'd be a stretch to imagine he decided to kidnap her in public, but if he's - talking to her, trying to coach her to tell someone that she needs child protection services - I swear to God, Mr. Cole, we don't volume-condition her, I just didn't want to sign the man's petition."

"No, I know," Cole said. "She doesn't look expectant when there's a lull in her music or anxious when there's a swell - I know you don't. Wait here." And he walked down the row of petitioners, and paused to sign the anti-volume-conditioning one, and I couldn't hear a word of what he said, but I stayed put.

And Mel popped out from behind the booth, and Mr. Cole offered her his hand, and she took it and walked with him right back to me.

Since she'd apparently developed a propensity to run off suddenly into crowds when merely hand-held, I scooped her up off the ground. "Thank you," I said. "What happened -?"

"He spotted her running around lost and gave her a pretzel and asked her some questions but couldn't get her to say anything incriminating," Cole said. "I don't think he'll be a problem again."

"That's good to know, but we're not staying. Gail got booted and I'm not leaving her to sit in the car for another four hours," I told him again. "And to be honest this entire day has been kind of a disaster even apart from the missing child."

"I like guitar," said Mel.

"Except the guitar room part," I amended. "If there was one of *those* back home I'd stand in the corner being ignored every week. But." Right. Cole was not exactly helpful in his usual territory. He'd just brought a lost kid back to her dad, not championed me in a duel.

"That's most of what the meetups are like," Cole said. "First half, anyway, and most people leave after that part."

"Great. That would do us a lot of good if -" I shook my head, trailed off.

"If you had a strax friend," said Cole.

"Or another relative or a sufficiently harmless next-door-neighbor or something or if you'd let me or Gail stand in the corner. That."

Cole squinted at me, then - fished in his pocket and came up with a business card.

"If you're in the market for a strax friend," he said, and then he moved off into the crowd.

I was rooted to the spot until Mel started pulling on my tie and I had to reassert sufficient presence of mind to not choke.

And then I headed for the door, and peeled off our nametags, and put Mel's pen back in her overalls pocket where it belonged, and met Gail at the car.

Not quite unmitigated disaster, and - something I actually knew how to do for her.

Mel's music played happy bells.

Tower

"The final step in your initiation is to leap from this tower," said the gray-robed figure.

Ven peered off the edge and gulped. "Is it."

"Yes," said the figure.

"Is it safe?"

"What do you think?"

Well, this was - as far as Ven knew - the same mysterious robed person who'd guided her through all the previous trials. And except for a bump on her shin she was fine. It was a long way down - so long she wouldn't be able to see if there was a net or a spell at the bottom.

She hesitated, a long moment, and the figure didn't stir or speak, and finally Ven flung herself forward, eyes squeezed shut, and fell -

Onto a spellcatch, soft and gentle, which placed her on her feet and held her up till her knees stopped wobbling.

"Why did you jump?" inquired another (?) gray-robed figure.

"I," started Ven, and then she paused and thought. "I trusted her," she finally asserted. "She hadn't steered me wrong."

And the gray-robed figure at the bottom of the tower nodded, and led her for miles east into a forest, where there was a hidden network of treehouses and bridges between them, and gave her a green robe, and she went among the others in the green robes and

found there the kindred spirits she had intended to find. She had passed the test.

"- leap from this tower," said the gray-robed figure.

"Seriously?" said Torix.

"Yes," said the figure.

"Right, never mind then," grumbled Torix, "I'll take the stairs, sorry to have wasted your time." And he headed back the way they had come, and the gray-robed figure did not move to stop him.

At the bottom of the stairs was another (?) gray-robed figure.

"Why didn't you jump?"

Torix hadn't expected to have any further interaction with the Order, after bailing on the last test. But whatever. "Because jumping from towers is not something I do. Not for you, not for anybody, if I go thinking it's smart to jump off towers something's gone wrong."

And the gray-robed figure at the bottom of the tower nodded, and beckoned Torix to follow for miles north into a valley, where there were tidy little houses all standing together in a village, and gave him a blue robe, and he went among the others in the blue robes and found there the kindred spirits he had intended to find, having passed the test.

"- from this tower," said the gray-robed figure.

Emlin had come prepared for anything. She laughed, handed her heavier bags to the gray-robed figure, and started re-buttoning the various flaps on her outfit and pinning the edges of her cape to her ankles. And she took a running start and flung herself into the air.

A leisurely basejump later, she deployed her parachute and came to a neat landing beside another (?) gray-robed figure.

"Why did you jump?"

"Because I *could*," said Emlin.

And the gray-robed figure who stood where she had landed nodded, and bade Emlin to follow for miles west into the mountains, where there were caves and huts and shelters of all rough-hewn homemade sorts, and gave her a brown robe, and she went among the others in the brown robes and found there the kindred spirits she had intended to find, the test well and thoroughly passed.

"- this tower," said the gray-robed figure.

"Is not," snorted Duraun.

The gray-robed figure tilted her head.

"The other steps weren't like that. They were puzzles. Some of them were disguised puzzles, but they were all puzzles. No fighting monsters, no lifting heavy objects, no leaping off of things without reasonably expecting them to be safe. This is just another kind of puzzle; lemme figure it out."

The gray-robed figure waited.

Finally Duraun suggested, "All right - you first."

The gray-robed figure nodded and leapt without hesitation. Duraun watched her fall, and went after her after she had landed safely.

When he was on his feet on the ground too, she showed him a place miles south in the plains, a live-in library, and gave him a white robe, and he went among the others in the white robes and found there

the kindred spirits he had intended to find, satisfied with his performance on the test.

"- tower," said the gray-robed figure.

"Why?" asked Myr. "What does that tell you about me? Is there a right answer to 'leap off this tower', anyway -"

And the gray-robed figure laughed, and led her down the stairs, and down further still, deep into the caverns under the tower, and gave her a gray robe, and...

Visitor

This story is set in the same universe as [Changeling](#) and [Queen](#).

This story is also available in audio, which you may find on [this episode of Wingardcast](#).

He didn't charm my name out of me the first time. No hungry wanderer has the wit to do that, and he was clever enough from the start to avoid the faerie food. I didn't even let him see me. I watched him, I thought he'd been here at least a day by the time I ran across him and he already looked like he'd survived an encounter with a pack of trolls. Meanwhile he watched everything. He watched the least of us tend the flowers and watched the Queen's chariot cross the sky and watched the shadows change directions indecisively under the eternal daylight of the upper Reach. He found a gatekeeper and passed her test (on that occasion she was looking for steadfastness; on another she might punish stubbornness, but he guessed correctly, and held up to scrutiny). He went home. This was common enough. The film between ours and yours is thin. You fall in, see enough to color your daydreams, and go home and have your choice of silence or dismissal.

What is not common is for the same visitor to return a second time.

He didn't charm my name out of me the next time I saw him. But that time, he did see me. I recognized him while he was moving the tiles in the outer wall of the labyrinth that protects the spring of liquid gold. I couldn't tell what he was trying to do, and moved from the shadowed areas where it's easiest to hide, to get a closer look.

And he said, "Hello."

And I said, "Good morrow, mortal." (And he smiled, and I didn't know why.) "What's your name?"

"What's yours?" he asked.

I didn't answer him. "What are you doing?"

"Experimenting," he said.

And I said, "You look hungry. Would you like a candied dewdrop?"

"Do you want a grape?" he asked, and he pointed at the satchel at his feet, full of food brought from the other side of the veil.

I laughed. "Oh! You *planned* this. I wondered why you had been so foolish as to fall in twice if we didn't tempt you to stay the first time."

"Three times," he said, moving the tiles again into a different pattern.

I laughed again, and he smiled, and if I couldn't have his name or be the one to convince him to take food from me, I could make him smile, and that was an opportunity too. Sometimes mortals stay on purpose, seduced by beauty. (Once they're here to stay, their few protections evaporate and they don't remain for long in their original forms - but that's all part of the fun.)

"You're a *tourist*," I teased him, and I clambered up to the top of the wall he was playing with. "Playing puzzles and going on little adventures with your name in the balance. There aren't games enough for you at home?"

"I'm a visitor," he suggested.

"Visitor," I allowed. "In and out twice. In a third time. If you like it here so much, why not stay?"

He looked up, met my eyes. He squinted when my wings flashed in the light. "Thinking about it," he admitted, and he smiled again. "If I found a nice comfortable place to stay where the Queen wouldn't eventually crush me."

"You could stay with *me* ," I suggested, fluttering down to his side, getting close enough to smell him.

"Could I, now."

"Of course. Taste a dewdrop from my hand. Or give me your name. Stay forever. Look at the pretty things. Play with the tiles."

"Wind up as dinner, or a mushroom, or fog. Dance without rest for eternity to decorate your hall, or your master's hall, or your lover's hall -"

"You'd be very decorative," I laughed.

"Would be, but no."

"What do you want here, then?"

"I want," he said, looking at the tiles again and slotting the last loose one into place in the new pattern, "to know how it works."

The wall shifted aside, a new entrance into the labyrinth. He grinned.

"Stay and I'll tell you all about it," I purred in his ear.

"Come home with me, I'll make you famous," he replied, and he touched me then, one finger under my chin and I licked my lips, "everyone will admire you, those pretty wings and that blue hair, I won't even make you dance."

I laughed at him.

And I flew away.

And I followed him again when he came back, because he was the most interesting thing about.

The third time I saw him I showed myself right away. He smiled at me and went on drawing circles in the dirt.

"Are you trying to cast spells?" I asked him, peering over his shoulder.

"Maybe."

"They won't work in the mortal world. Stay with me, be a sorcerer. I'll keep you for myself, the Queen has enough sorcerers in her court not to steal mine."

"Come with me when I go. Ghostwrite a book. I won't let them cart you off to a laboratory."

I laughed. I touched his hair, made it stand up. "You aren't afraid to touch me," I said.

"You're not one of the violent kinds."

I tugged on his shoulder and had him pinned to the ground under me in a moment. He went limp and pliant, didn't even try to resist. "Are you sure?" I asked.

"If I wasn't sure," he said, "I wouldn't have let you get so close. You didn't hurt me."

I pouted and let him up.

"I'm sure you'd be very dangerous," he said, "if I let you feed me, or told you my name."

"I would be gentle with you," I cooed. "You could do whatever you liked, really. Most of the time."

"You're already nice to me," he said.

"So you can see, I would go on doing it."

"That logic doesn't even work reliably at home, let alone here."

I sighed and sat next to his circle. I wasn't a sorcerer myself, I didn't know what the shapes meant. "What are you trying to do?"

"Weather, today," he said.

I watched him draw.

"I *would* be kind to you," I asserted.

"Maybe you would," he acknowledged. "I'm not going to stay here. With a faerie I've met twice who hasn't told me his name."

"I don't know your name either."

"I'm," he said, and I straightened up, "a visitor." I slumped again. "Why do you want me so badly? Trick another faerie out of their name, into debt, whatever other ways there are."

I shrugged. I had faerie vassals already. "You're interesting."

He smiled at me. He drew another angle in his circle. "Thanks."

He called down rain, and I fled for cover because I hate it when my wings are wet, and he sat next to me under a tree, and he found all of the fey berries I'd snuck into his bag of food and picked them out and threw them away.

Then he tousled my hair, and drew himself a gate out, and went home. He didn't stop to ask me again if I'd come along, not when

there was a door right there.

I caught him on his way in, the next time, and caught a glimpse of the other side of the gap on the veil he used - a narrow space between walls of regular, red stones, mortared with something rough and beige, paved between them with something dark and scattered with debris that was brightly colored under the dirt and rot. He stepped in, and the gate closed, and he waved at me.

"Good morrow, Visitor."

"Is that my nickname now? I still don't have anything to call you."

"You could probably think of something."

"I'd rather find out."

"What would you do with me?" I asked, leering at him.

"I'd be nice to you," he murmured.

I laughed at him. "What are you doing here today?"

"Learning things. What else?"

"Oh, I don't know, you could challenge me to a game for our names."

"Why would you even accept the challenge, if I issued it? Why would you want another layer of command over the Queen's?"

"It'd be fun," I said. His legs were longer than mine; I fluttered to keep up with him when he started walking. "If you're going to play, play for stakes."

"Is that how you get your vassals, then?"

"Most of them."

"They lose a game and you keep their names forever."

"Well, we *mean* forever, but sometimes they get away," I shrugged.
"Forever's a long time."

"Have you been a vassal before? Apart from to the Queen, I mean."

"Probably. I don't remember. It's been a very long time, you know, we change roles, the old lifetimes become like stories and then less than that."

"Huh," he says. And then, "Mortals are called that for a reason, you know."

"I know," I laughed, "you're here and gone, barely for days. You've so little to lose."

"It's still all we get."

"Yet you keep wandering here, where everyone and everything wants to snap you up and keep you."

"You would, wouldn't you," he mused. "Even though you like me. *Because* you like me. You'd take my name or feed me and find something or other to do with me, maybe nice, maybe not, maybe you'd turn me into a bird or keep me as your love-slave or dangle me from your ceiling -"

"Was one of those supposed to be the nice outcome?" I leered.

"- even though you like me."

"Because I like you," I said.

"That's not what mortals do when we like each other," he snorted.

"No? You like *me* , what would you do with me if you could do whatever you pleased?"

He touched my face again. "That's not how it works at home. Getting to do whatever you please with someone isn't - a liking thing. It's more like this, how we are now, no compulsions, just spending time together, only at home names have no power so the possibility isn't hanging over our heads. Mortals who like each other aren't... covetous like that."

"No?"

"Well, sometimes. It's not thought to be very healthy." He dropped his hand.

"I'm *perfectly* healthy," I said, draping myself over his shoulder. "And I *covet* you. Tell me your name and I'll show you."

"If I got yours," he said, "and you were all mine, to do whatever I liked with, what would you think of that?"

"Well!" I laughed. "I'm not going to *do* it. That'd be *losing* ."

"How would you feel about it?" he pressed.

"Oh, everyone would laugh at me, losing my name to a mortal -"

"And would that bother you?"

"It's all part of the same game," I said.

"I'm not hearing a *yes, it would be horrible* ."

"You'd mean forever. It wouldn't really be," I shrugged.

"So you'd try to get away."

"Otherwise I'd just go on losing. It's no fun to lose all the time."

"It really does boil down to just a game, doesn't it."

"What else would it be?"

"Hmm," he said, and he laid his hand on my jaw. I squirmed around until I was sitting in his lap.

"Kiss me," I suggested.

"You've probably got faerie food tucked in your cheek."

"Ah, you've caught me."

"Tell me your name and I will, though," he whispered. "It'd be safe then."

"Safe, safe, safe, it's *boring*, Visitor."

"I'm not playing the same game as you," he said.

"Try it, it's fun."

"I don't have enough to gamble with. You're the high-roller here. You can afford the, what, eighty years if I'm moderately lucky."

"Pfff," I said, "that's nothing. That's not even worth playing for."

"Well," he remarked, and his eyes sparkled, "I'd *mean* forever."

"Ooh."

"That's what I'm here to try. What did you think I was here to do?" he whispered. "Do you think I can do it?"

"...Ooh."

He grinned at me.

"You're *dangerous*," I accused, laughing. "What would you do if you had me?"

He looked tired, for a moment. "Trust you. I would be having more fun right now - different fun, but *more* of it - if I could trust you. That's what I'd do."

"No locking me up in a tower as your love slave?" I leaned in close, winked.

"Is that one supposed to be the nice outcome?" he murmured.

"Maybe. Kiss me."

"Tell me your name and I will."

"Astikari," I breathed, and before I had a chance to regret it, he made good on his promise.

He was nice to me.

And he had a point, about it being more fun. He could stay longer, for one thing - food from his vassal's hand, however fey in origin, wouldn't bind him to the place, and so I fed him all sorts of confections and he knew I wasn't going to poison him and that was entertaining in its own way, how he relaxed. He still went back to the mortal world occasionally. He didn't make me go with him, only bade me run errands and be waiting for him when he returned.

And I did, and he always did return, and I was at his side always, and I began to see the shape of his plan.

He didn't want to be a visitor.

He didn't want to eventually let slip his name to some beauty and consign himself to some traditional fate.

He wanted to learn everything, and use the one advantage a mortal has in our world.

Not even the Queen knew his name, and not even she could command him, if he had enough power to face her.

The Queen's reign was meant to be forever. And she *meant* forever.

But it's such a long time...

Sympathy

They arrive weeping.

They look like fairies, or elves, or angels - not human, *they don't want to lie to you*, but close enough to have faces, close enough to be beautiful, close enough to wring their hands. Close enough to cry.

(If you betray a hint of sympathy for their plight, they will only mourn harder. *They don't want to upset you.*)

(But they will, because they have to.)

You get one of your own. So to speak. She's not your obedient servant; she would save you if you crashed your car, but she will not make your coffee. She will only follow you around, and, when you seem most receptive - she will offer you gifts.

She cares about you. She wants you to be happy. She wants it so desperately that she weeps, sincerely, whenever she dares - though *she doesn't want to upset you* . It's not for show... exactly. She wasn't born looking like a fairy. This isn't how she'd normally convey grief, and she *is* wearing this face so you'll understand her when she does.

That doesn't make it any less real.

What is she so upset about?

You won't take the presents.

Some people do take the presents. Those people turn into fairies/elves/angels - or *whatever* , because there are enough of the original visitors to go around pleading with the holdouts. Those who accept don't *have* to look alien and pretty and expressive if that's not

their favorite thing, and the visitors don't *care* about shape. They care about *happiness* . And you don't have enough of it, and that hurts your fairy friend. It hurts her so bad for you to hurt that you wonder why she doesn't kidnap you and force delight on you.

She'd like to. Oh, she wishes she could. It would be so much easier. But she cares about *you* ; and *you* won't take the presents. *You* would be upset if she forced you, and it would only be a technicality if she did it so fast that you never saw her coming. And *she doesn't want to upset you* .

So what she will do instead is follow you around whenever her company doesn't make you too furious, and make sure you don't die if she can possibly help it because she *does* care more about your *life* than your permission, and sometimes she whispers in your ear. Maybe on Christmas because everyone *else* who loves you gets to give you gifts then (and she *does* love you). Maybe when you have to put your dog to sleep and it eats you up inside, she wonders softly if you'd like to make it stop. Maybe when you're standing over gorgeous scenery and breathing delicious air and squeezing your lover's hand, your fairy and your lover's angel whisper in unison that it could *last* .

If you take all her presents - the big presents, not just the little ones that she hopes to tempt you with, the massive life-altering presents - then it will last. You'll be happy. You'll still be complicated (she wants *you* to be happy, not some simplification). You can take your lover with you, if you say yes at the same time or close enough.

Why isn't *she* happy? She *wants* to be happy. She *could* be happy. She wears most of her own offerings herself; if you tried to hit her she'd be unmarked, and *her* lovers never argue with her, and when it served her designs to take fairy form (for *you* , so she could better communicate with *you*) she could do that as easily as you can put on a sweater. She could be happy. That's what she's for; that's what they're all for; that's what they want, for themselves as well as you -

Well, she can't be.

Because she loves you, and you don't have the things she thinks you need, and she will not, *will not* destroy you to fix that - so she wears a face that looks like yours, and cries real tears that look like yours, because if you'd love her like she loves you, *if she could only become that important to you*, you'd take what she offers instantly. If you'd want her to stop crying the way she wants you to stop hurting, you'd let her change your nerves, you'd let her pour magic into your hands, you'd let her lay hands on your soul.

You won't, yet, but your friends' friends start. You don't, yet, but your town looks emptier. You haven't, yet, but the ranters on their soapboxes speaking out against the alien menace, standing in the park with their elves wringing their hands in chagrin beside them, are thinning out.

You aren't, today, but if she bravely restrains one more snuffle of misery -

Well, you like being happy, too, don't you?

DivineMatch

This story is also available in audio, which you may find on [this episode of Wingardcast](#).

I'm not ashamed to admit that I have accepted human sacrifice. If you can't worship me at my worst, you sure as hell don't deserve my best

Pass.

Yahweh992 has inspected you, as he does every sparrow that falls! Check him out - he's a good match!

Pass. Since when was a god of *everything* exceptionally good for anyone in particular? She hadn't even prayed to that 93% harvest goddess, and *Her* portfolio included specific mention of regular weather miracles.

Don't be shy. Send It a prayer.

She wasn't really comfortable with genderless gods. It was just a preference. She didn't have to defend it to anyone.

Check out this pantheon of suggestions!

A generic father god, a generic mother goddess, one of those party gods with all His pictures full of wine and half-naked worshipers. Pass. Pass. Pass.

You have one new prophecy.

She opened it.

Hello, Luanne. Yes, I know your real name. I'm looking for a close, personal relationship with you. Don't worry that you'll be lost in a vast congregation. I'm telling you - just you - that next week, it's going to rain on Tuesday over Pensacola. You're my prophet about that, but if sharing that special knowledge with the world goes well, maybe I can trust you with more?

It was obviously a form letter, even if He had her name right. She closed it without reply.

im strict monolatry all the way if i find out ur cheating on me ill litening ur ass

Pass. Luanne didn't have any competing gods, but she didn't think monolatry was for her.

She modified her search settings to look among her fellow mortals. Some people went to DivineMatch for reasons other than its stated purpose. Of course, she could say that she was in the market for nondenominational socializing all she wanted; some people would think she was just out to be converted - but maybe she'd find someone to have a plain, secular friendship with.

_Parishoner_4_ lived a mile away from Luanne and liked waterskiing. *Send her a testimony!* It still called them that even when Luanne had no intention of proselytizing; she supposed the site couldn't tell.

Hi, Parishoner. I just want it clear up front that I don't want to be preached to about (Luanne checked the profile again) the Divine Kaleidoscope, although I'm sure She's great. I just wondered if you wanted to waterski together sometime. I haven't been able to find anyone else who likes it among my offline friends.

Luanne hit Send.

She browsed some more mortal profiles. She didn't find anyone else claiming hobbies in common with her, and hadn't really expected to.

DivineMatch was full of mortals trying to court gods for special favor. Most people weren't going to talk about waterskiing.

Just to pass the time, Luanne started pretending she was a goddess, combing through the throng for a high priest or a crusader. Should spelling count? Did it matter if her intercessors were ugly - would it turn off other worshipers? That guy with an architecture degree wanted to build her a beautiful temple if she'd cure his cancer...

Luanne logged out.

This took her back to the DivineMatch homepage. A stylized icon of an angel invited her to make an account. "Fill the god-shaped hole in your heart, or swell the choirs singing Thy praises!"

Choirs singing her praises...

They hadn't checked to see if she was *really* mortal when she'd made her account. Would they check to see if she was a goddess, if she wanted to pretend?

Luanne smirked, and clicked the angel.

I am a Goddess seeking worship.

She crossed her fingers, and clicked again.

Soon, Luanne was logged in as "smallgoddess". She didn't want to go around claiming huge miracles; she'd be found out at once and reported to the God Mods. She wrote her profile as a modest household goddess.

I won't demand much from you. No tithing, no getting up early once a week, no burnt offerings... just someone to pray to when you need a listening ear.

She considered adding *I'm a cuddler* , but no, people generally weren't looking for senses of humor in their gods unless they were into Trickster figures, and that didn't fit with what she was trying to project.

Current number of worshipers: 15

She didn't want to claim a huge church. That would be suspicious. But even on a matching site, people steered clear of gods who *nobody* counted on their pantheon.

She didn't think it would be *too* suspicious if none of her fifteen followers were on DivineMatch. Maybe that would even be appealing; she was enough god for them, they weren't looking elsewhere to fill out their personal pantheons.

Or she was inflating her number. But she *was* , so she couldn't really provide much evidence against it.

After she'd gone through some more match parameters (holy days: first of each month [standard calendar]; minimum number of mortals required to gather in Thy name: 1; favored charitable causes of the church: sustainable anti-poverty efforts...) she named her ordinary mortal account as her own worshiper. Then just for kicks she awarded herself priestess status. Not "high" priestess; with only fourteen imaginary congregants to preside over there wasn't much room for elaborate ecclesiastical hierarchy.

I strive to be approachable, rather than living on a mountaintop or a distant planet, but if you're interested in knowing more about Me and don't feel comfortable with direct prayer, you can send a testimony to My priestess, lu lu lu.

Dietary restrictions: strictly no cannibalism, limit high fructose corn syrup, thou shalt not consume Vegemite. (She giggled to herself.)
Symbol...

Luanne drew a picture of crossed skis, stylized so the only hint that her symbol wasn't an "X" was the slight curve to the tops of the lines. She scanned it, cropped it, and uploaded it.

Preferred intercessors: priesthood. (She couldn't very well send seraphs or unborn souls or imprints of her face in toast hither and thither to bear her messages.) Minimum frequency of prayers for members in good standing: 1/wk. Acceptable monetary contribution types: consult priestess.

Luanne hoped that no one was going to actually send her money; that would feel wrong. If someone asked her-as-lu_lu_lu about it, she'd suggest diverting the contribution towards a charity.

Monolatry... The buttons offered were "monolatrous/henotheistic worshipers only", "worship only within My formal pantheon" (this was greyed out, since she hadn't joined a pantheon), "polytheists OK", "kathenotheism/short term worship OK", "katheno/poly both OK", "I am a concept; this question does not apply", and a write-in box for "other/details". Luanne ticked "polytheists OK". It'd be hypocritical of her to do otherwise.

She realized abruptly that her mortal profile needed updating to reflect what she was doing; lu_lu_lu currently advertised herself as godless and had a profile full of her mostly-hypothetical virtues as a follower. She logged into that account in a different browser, and fleshed out smallgoddess's details while lu_lu_lu's page loaded and processed those changes.

Thirty minutes later, lu_lu_lu was the sole priestess over fourteen laity in the worship of a more thoroughly explained smallgoddess. (Luanne didn't have any brilliant ideas for a "real" goddess name, let alone fancy titles. The site didn't demand them, but it did prod her to add them in order to attain 60% profile completion.)

Lu_lu_lu also had a new testimony.

_Parishoner_4_ wrote: Hi, lululu! I'm in a skiing club you could join (Luanne clicked the link open in a new tab, then closed it when it announced that it required registration to read) but if you're not looking to hear testimonies what are you even doing on this site? Do you think your "smallgoddess" (doesn't She even have a title or anything?) is really enough to fulfill your spiritual hungers? I love the Divine Kaleidoscope but She's got a limited portfolio - but She's not a household goddess at least, She's everywhere, She's a goddess of colors. And protection and stuff. But I still want to fill in my pantheon some, don't you? But I guess you don't really want a testimony you just want to ski, so yeah, skiing club.

Time to think of a title, Luanne supposed.

Except everything she could think of sounded dumb applied to *herself*. It was all well and good for (click, click) an ethereally lovely woman with giant gaudy butterfly wings to go by "Divine Kaleidoscope"...

Luanne poked around at other deities who also listed themselves as household-type gods. Most of those didn't have titles, or had quiet unassuming ones like "The Hearthwarmer" or "Threshold's Guardian".

She decided to do without a title unless she had a really good idea later - or someone else came up with one for her - but she needed a name. Her mortal profile didn't reveal more than the first two letters of her name. She took the rest of it and turned it backwards. "Enna". That sounded like it could be a goddess's name.

My name is Enna, she prepended to her profile's freeform box of text.

She proofread both profiles, then signed out, wrote in her diary, and went to bed.

Welcome back to DivineMatch, Enna! Thou hast 312 new prayers.

Holy crap.

Luanne knew that gods got more messages than mortals - there were fewer of them, and while some mortals only worshiped one god, *all* gods wanted multiple worshipers. (Or if there were some who didn't, they didn't hang out on DivineMatch.) But she hadn't even uploaded a likeness yet, or issued prophecies to any mortals...

She clicked the link, biting her lip.

The patterns in these messages were *different* than the ones she'd gotten as a mortal, but after the first ten or so she'd gotten accustomed to the stock types. She regretfully archived the mass-distributed prayers about diseases and soccer matches and world hunger. She forwarded questions about her doctrine to the lu_lu_lu account, so she could answer them without having to worry about sounding godly. She clicked the "acknowledge this prayer" button to wordlessly confirm receipt on the surprisingly large number of prayers of thanksgiving; people were already asking for things, and by sheer coincidence apparently were sometimes getting them.

Luanne wondered if any other gods were faking.

But she didn't know how to find someone's real name to address them that way in a message. She couldn't fling lightning at anyone. She couldn't even do more household-goddess things, like fence burglars out or keep the gutters clear. Not without training a couple of dogs or renting a ladder, anyway.

Feeling deeply silly, Luanne went outside and focused on her gutters with what she hoped was a deific stare.

They still had heaps of pine needles in them. She went back in.

It was days after the start of the Enna... thing... that Luanne got around to checking her regular email. *I'll be in town soon* said the subject, and it was from Ramona.

Ramona was Luanne's oldest friend, which was saying very little, as they'd met less than a year ago. It hadn't been on DivineMatch, but it had been on a messageboard around a the topic of gods and religions in general. Ramona had said something clever about how mid-tier sorts of worshippers would wind up having the worst fits with their gods: undesirable mortals could worship whoever they liked best, since eventually they'd get the hint that no one would offer them special privileges. The most appealing mortals, the most beautiful or faithful or competent, could afford to hold out for priesthoods or prophethoods or consortships with opportunities to bear demigods, and be choosy between several such options. Mortals who were neither might try to hold out, and might get offers, but not necessarily from the gods who were best for them.

Luanne had remarked that gods had some insight into who would work well with them and who wouldn't, and Ramona had answered, and everything had gone from there.

But Ramona lived a hundred miles away, so the email was exciting.

I'm going to be near you for a convention on Friday, the message read. It was not Friday yet, mercifully; Luanne hadn't let the visit fall moot in her distraction. *Can I crash on your couch 2 nights? I'll buy you dinner, we can hang.*

Luanne replied at once. *Of course.* She gave her address. *What's the convention?*

The reply came within a couple of minutes. She'd caught Ramona online. *Oh, good, you're there, I was worrying about hotels! It's a work thing, all about traffic light timing, it'd bore you to tears. Are you busy lately?*

No. Seasonal work, Luanne answered. Till snowfall season I'm just sitting on the computer all day wishing I could afford to hire someone to tow me around waterskiing on my own. I don't suppose you want to go in with me on renting just a boat so we can take turns?

Ramona answered, *No can do, I don't have a swimsuit*, which was a flimsy reason; Luanne took it for the polite rejection of the activity that it was. *I'll show up on your doorstep Thursday at 8ish!*

Thursday at eightish, Ramona rang the doorbell. Luanne let her in. She'd tidied up the place, so it was no longer too embarrassing except for its size and poor repair. "Ramona!" she said happily, holding out her arms in what Ramona could choose to take as an exclamation of enthusiasm or an invitation for a hug.

Ramona chose the latter, giving Luanne a quick squeeze before dumping her knapsack full of luggage on the shoe mat. "Hi, Luanne! It's great to finally meet you in person."

Ramona was a little short, a quarter Asian, a snappy dresser. She wore most of her pantheon's neatly matched holy symbols in a charm bracelet, with the primary god of the bunch in a place of honor on a chain around her throat. She also had a halo glowing sunnily over the crown of her head.

"I didn't know you were haloed," Luanne remarked.

"It's new!" Ramona enthused, grinning. "My Lord Anthos gave it to me when I dedicated his new temple for him last week, and he's let me keep it so far. I'm so *blessed*! What do you think?"

"It suits you," pronounced Luanne.

"What about your spirituality? Still seeking?" Ramona asked, sidling in and sitting on the couch that Luanne had wrapped in sheets. "We

don't talk enough, I doubt I'd know if you'd been made the caliph of a sun god or something."

"I'm not a caliph," Luanne said, shrugging. She sat down next to Ramona.

"Aww," Ramona sighed. "I don't understand you. Most people who've been seeking this long will at least pick someone generic to worship while they look for a better fit. My church would have you - we like to think we have something for everyone."

"I've been, you know, looking around," Luanne said.

"Didn't you have a faith when you were little?" Ramona prodded. "How long have you been godless, anyway?"

"Yeah, of course," Luanne answered automatically. "Just... you know, a while."

Why had she said that...?

"You don't want to talk religion, do you," Ramona said. "If I were you I wouldn't either. Where do you want to go for dinner tomorrow? My treat, and I can expense it, don't worry if it's pricey."

Luanne named a restaurant. They talked about food, and about travel, and about how Ramona had begun to adjust her wardrobe in reaction to the halo, and finally they went to sleep. Ramona apparently couldn't turn the halo off, and Luanne had to stuff the crack under her door with a t-shirt to get her room dark enough for sleeping.

Why had she said she'd had a faith when she was little? Most people did, but she didn't think she was one of them.

What *had* she been raised as? Not just religion, but in general. Culture, *language* - would Ramona be able to identify Luanne's

accent, if asked?

It occurred to Luanne that she didn't remember anything about her childhood to speak of. She had ideas about how to answer questions regarding it. She'd name a date of birth when prompted, for instance. She gave "Smythe" as her last name on forms that needed one. She remembered claiming to have played soccer on a forum.

She got up out of bed and looked up the forum post. It was months old, but the search feature worked pretty well.

I used to play soccer , read the post. I'd look for a team now but it wouldn't mesh well with my work, which is seasonal: as soon as the snow melts, I'm busy all day.

That was backwards. She worked in the *winter* .

Didn't she?

She backtracked to the post where she'd first interacted with Ramona. It was posted in the summertime. The thread had gone on for a bit, diverging from the religious topic.

No, I'm not working right now. I have an autumn-and-spring-only job.

Luanne remembered writing that, come to think of it.

Why had she written it?

Luanne stared at the screen, then nudged the t-shirt out of the way of her door and woke up Ramona.

"What is it, Luanne?" her friend asked groggily, sitting up from the half-doze.

"I'm really, really sorry," Luanne said, "I know this timing is really inconvenient, but I just realized I have no idea where I came from, I

don't know what to do."

Ramona blinked sleepily. "Huh? I'm gonna guess, your parents."

"I don't know if I *have* any. I can't remember them, I don't know how I'd get in touch with them, I don't remember anything earlier than about a year and a half ago, I've been saying things that I can't figure out why," Luanne said.

"Anthos's bones, Luanne, I just wanted to crash on your couch, please don't be a crazy Internet person," mumbled Ramona, dropping her face into her pillow. "I just wanna sleep. Anthos'll strike you down if you murder me in the night, you know, I got a halo. G'way."

Luanne stood up and drew back. She returned to her bedroom, replaced the t-shirt, and sat at her computer. Too wired to consider sleeping, she went through her entire e-mail history.

The first email she had ever sent was apparently a reply to a spam message, which included a great many terms that didn't apply to her and, randomly enough, the word "waterski".

She'd answered it with the sentence "I like waterskiing!".

What in the name of any and every god...?

Luanne paged forward. It looked like every personal trait she had came from someplace similar. She remembered typing the words, looking at the spam - it wasn't like she was trawling a stranger's account - but she couldn't remember anything significant about her mental state at the time. Had she been reminiscing about something she could no longer remember? Had she been discovering things about herself she hadn't realized, or inventing them as she went along?

When she started sending emails to recipients other than spambots, they were all the same. She was never working; she was always seasonally employed during some other season. She was never a congregant, always a seeker. She'd signed up for DivineMatch under her mortal screenname six months ago.

She had no correspondence anywhere from a landlord on her house. Her bank account was a year old and showed no paychecks or rent charges, just a steadily dwindling balance from an opening deposit of \$15,775 spent on food and clothes and household objects. She didn't seem to have paid anything for her car, either.

Something was *up* .

It had a miraculous flavor to it.

And Luanne knew where to go looking for gods.

"Don't worry about me, the convention serves breakfast," Ramona called in the morning. Luanne was up - still. "I'll see you tonight, we'll get dinner."

"Okay," Luanne called back.

She was still paging through the gods that DivineMatch offered to her. She'd answered every parameter question offered to mortal users, trying to narrow down the field. Who could have done this to her - or made her in the first place - or done whatever had been done to cause her to be *out of nowhere* ?

Then she made a new mortal account called "fromnowhere" and answered all the questions again, skewing her answers to attract Trickster gods, because this smelled of *trick* .

DivineMatch obligingly showed her pages of sneaky, mischievous gods. She took an instant dislike to each one, but none stood out,

and none of the messages that accumulated in fromnowhere's inbox looked like anything other than mass mailing.

Ugh .

Luanne abandoned the computer to look through her house for physical evidence. There were books on the shelf, all of which she'd bought in the last year. There was food in the fridge and the oldest thing in her cupboards was from eight months back. Was she going to have to go to City Hall and look through records to find out who owned her home? She couldn't find a birth certificate, a Social Security card, anything like that anywhere.

She went back online.

She tried a new deity account, this time posing as a boring sort of goddess looking for a pantheon to join under the handle "allthingsbright". That didn't yield anything either. She logged out.

With four accounts on DivineMatch, she didn't type her screenname anymore, she just clicked in the box to get a dropdown menu.

lu_lu_lu

smallgoddess

fromnowhere

allthingsbright

recordkeeper

She didn't recognize that last name...

She started to log into that account, then changed her mind, logged in as lu_lu_lu instead, and searched for the profile.

I'm Unnael the Recordkeeper, a goddess of memory.

Last online: more than 1 year ago

Worshipers: 287

Preferred intercessors: priesthood

There was a link to a profile of a priest, "journalKeeper".

Luanne clicked it.

I'm Rob, priest of Unnael the Recordkeeper. This is just a placeholder profile until Our Lady Unnael returns to us. I'm not going to be checking my inbox very often, sorry.

Well, that wouldn't help, if he wasn't going to answer her mail asking what in anyone's hell was going on.

Luanne logged out.

She typed "recordkeeper" into the screenname box, and crossed her fingers, hoping her browser knew the password that she didn't.

It did.

She was in.

But there was no startling revelation associated with it. She could edit Unnael's profile, if she wanted, read all the answers to all the questions, but she didn't remember this place.

"Recordkeeper". Some recordkeeper. She wasn't learning anything more inside the profile than she could have seen from outside of it.

She started poking around in the rest of her computer. *Some recordkeeper*, she thought, unable to turn up anything that she didn't expect to find there. She kept diligently updated files of her past grocery lists and her budget and her to-do list, but there was nothing older than a year ago.

Ugh.

Luanne collapsed onto her bed and fell into an overdue sleep.

"I'm staaaarving," sang Ramona's voice. "Let's go out and get some food on my boss's dime, huh?"

Luanne's eyes fluttered open. "Coming," she said.

She threw on a new shirt, as she'd been in the old one for almost two days by this point, but deemed her jeans acceptable, and came out to meet her friend. "Uh, does pasta sound good?"

"I'm easy," said Ramona. "Hey, are you feeling better? You were acting funny last night, do you sleepwalk and talk about your dreams or something?"

"No, I just have no idea where I came from, as of about a year ago," Luanne said, pulling the front door open. "I'll figure it out, though. I think."

"Okay, I'll play along," said Ramona, following. "Ahem. 'Wouldn't you have noticed this earlier, Luanne?'"

"Apparently not."

"How did it happen?"

"I'm not sure. Have you ever heard of a goddess called Unnael the Recordkeeper?"

"Not off the top of my head..."

"Didn't think so," sighed Luanne. She got into her car; Ramona took the passenger seat. "Do you have enough pull with Anthos that you could get Him to help? I know it's a lot to ask..."

"I just have a halo, not a holy relic; I'm a small-time cleric," Ramona said. "Hey, I rhymed... I don't even do priestess stuff as my regular job, I do traffic signal timing to pay the bills."

"Right," sighed Luanne.

"How does someone from nowhere pay for stuff?" Ramona asked playfully; she obviously thought this was a fantasy scenario Luanne was toying with.

"Mystery fifteen thousand dollars. Mystery lack of rent or utility bills and car payments."

"What a mystery," said Ramona.

"Yes." The noodle restaurant wasn't far. Luanne parked, and they got out. "It's very mysterious."

"Is this a story you're writing, or like a screenplay, and you want to see if your plot twist is predictable...?"

"What do you think happens next?" Luanne asked. "Two, please."

They sat. "Uuum. So the protagonist is like you?" Ramona asked.

"Lots like me, yeah."

"You find the story's faith interest and He or She provides you with the revelation?" suggested Ramona. "Decent screenplay has to have a faith interest."

"How do I find the faith interest?" Luanne asked, frustrated.

"Undirected prayer?"

"Maybe. I found my pantheon that way," Ramona said, touching the charm on her necklace. "You spend so much time on DivineMatch and you haven't gotten anywhere."

Luanne scanned the menu and then dropped it, making up her mind to order the usual macaroni dish. "I forgot to mention that early on I find evidence that the whole thing is somehow connected to the faith of Unnael the Recordkeeper."

"The name kind of implies that somewhere, there might be records," said Ramona, nodding and smirking.

"Yeah, I guess." But she'd already turned the entire house upside down, looking for documentation of her existence, turned her computer inside out, looking for old files...

They ordered pasta. They ate pasta. Luanne drove them back to her place, and Ramona announced that she was exhausted from a day of traffic light seminars.

Luanne sat up, staring at the login screen offering her five accounts on DivineMatch, until she drooped with tiredness again and went to grab her diary and scribble a few words in it before crashing. She'd neglected it yesterday, staying up all night.

She looked at the new blank page for a moment, and then slowly, deliberately paged backwards.

The first page of the diary was dated a year ago.

Ugh .

And it was inane, too. *I seem to live in a house. I think I like it. I need an email account.* No wonder Luanne had rarely thought about the time of her inexplicable origin; she'd been boring then.

That was the first page, it didn't go back any farther.

Luanne closed the diary, and opened it again. She tried to open it *harder* . She tried to open it like she was a *god* -

Paper bloomed under Her hands, reams of it, books and books and books, and Unnael found Herself again.

"Recordkeeper," said Rob, dropping to his knees. "You have returned."

" *Never* re-alphabetize My books again, Reverend," said Unnael. "That you are allowed to look at them is a privilege. Do you think you know better than the Recordkeeper how to order a library?"

"I am so sorry, Recordkeeper." Rob swallowed. "I did not think it could harm You..."

"It no longer can; I've seen to that. But I wouldn't go by this title if My records were unimportant. If I am ever confused into incarnating Myself again, then I will not be so forgiving after reaffirming My divinity."

"I'm sure it will never happen again, Recordkeeper."

"Come up with a good story about it," sighed Unnael. "Something that explains why I was gone and doesn't make Me sound vulnerable to shelving."

"Yes, Recordkeeper."

Unnael departed in a swirl of documents.

Assassin

"What are you *wearing*?" Helen asked the man at the tree-shaded bus stop, hesitating to sit down next to him on the bench. "What" wasn't the right question. She could see what he was wearing: swim goggles, a football jersey, Crocs, a kilt, a gray hoodie that was too tight on him, knee-length rainbow-striped socks, and a leather cuff around his neck with metal spikes coming out of it. Helen knew at least one person who'd have worn each item in the outfit, but would expect any pair of them to fight to the death if they were ever stuck in a room together.

The man looked down at himself, which was an effective enough way to see everything except the goggles suctioned to his forehead. He was bald, without even eyebrows, but looked too thickset and robust to have just survived cancer. Maybe he was a mental patient, picked out all his own hair... no, there was some on his arms. Surely a mental patient who picked at hair would've gotten that. Or not, Helen didn't know. "A MacGregor plaid kilt," he said, "a pair of yellow Crocs, a -"

"Never mind," Helen said.

"Do you know when the next bus that goes to the stop on Ninth Street will be?" he asked her, after a silence.

"Twenty minutes," she said, after a glance at her watch. "That's where I'm going, too."

"Really?" he asked. "Are you from that neighborhood? Do you know where Roger Swansea lives?"

Helen tilted her head. "Why are you looking for him?"

The man peered at her, assessment in his eyes. Helen shifted uncomfortably and moved one of her braids behind her ear; plastic ties clicked against each other. She didn't mind when people from her high school checked her out; older men she did mind.

"I suppose it doesn't much matter if I tell you," the man said finally. "I'd have seen the police report if you were going to call - well - anyway. Swansea's got to die," he said.

"Has he," said Helen. She kept her hands on her knees, but shifted her hips so her phone was pressed between her leg and the bench. It was there if she needed it.

"Well, you're not going to believe me," laughed the man, "but, you see, I'm a time traveler. And Roger Swansea invented a time machine. Not the same kind I used - I'm not stupid, I checked carefully for paradoxes - but today he's going to go forward in time, and he's going to bring forward a disease that they've eradicated and lost resistance to. Hundreds of people are going to die before they can stop it."

"So you decided to kill him," Helen said. "Why didn't you kill him - oh - last year? Since you're a time traveler. Why do it now?"

"Paradox checker didn't like it," the man said. "It said I could go back today - but it made me land in the bathroom of a diner outside town, was as close as I could get to his house by machine. I'm having to bus across to his place. Lucky I was able to print some currency and some clothes from this time."

"Lucky," agreed Helen absently. "But why do you have to *kill* the guy, not just convince him to skip his trip or go in a biohazard suit?"

"Because," the time traveler said, wagging a finger authoritatively, "history shows that he disappears on this day. If I just convince him to stay, he'll still be around - paradox in the lightcone. If I convince

him to go in a biohazard suit... Well, that could actually work. Does he have a biohazard suit?"

"Not as far as I know," Helen said.

"There you go, it could take him more than a day to get ahold of one, that's probably why the paradox checker didn't say I could do that. It said I could try to kill him just fine, though."

"Won't you create some kind of paradox in the future he's going to bring the disease to?" Helen asked. "They're in your own past, if I understand right."

"Not quite," said the time traveler. "That is to say, Swansea technically landed outside my light cone - they lived on Europa, I'm from out on Argo. The only reason I got the news was via more time travel, and that means I can mess with the events that led to me getting it. It doesn't count if time travel was the only reason it could causally affect you."

"Uh-huh," said Helen skeptically.

"How long until the bus gets here?" the time traveler asked.

"Six minutes," she said, glancing at her wrist. "So you're just going to kill the man. You know he's got a family?"

"I'm going to save hundreds of lives," said the time traveler.

"In a manner of speaking," said Helen. She reached into the inside pocket of her coat, pulled out her miniature laser gun, and shot the time traveler between the eyes. He fell off the bench, the look of pious smugness still on his face.

Helen dragged the absurdly-clad body into the trees and took the long way home, rather than let the bus driver get a look at her to be questioned when the time traveler was found. Assuming he wouldn't

just evaporate, or something. She didn't know how his sort of time travel worked.

When she'd finally walked the mile and a half, Helen knocked on the door to the basement. "Dad," she called. "Da-a-ad."

"I'm busy, Helen!" he shouted up the stairs.

"It's really important!"

"More important than the mess with the matter agitator?"

"I had to shoot a guy again, so about that important," she said.

Her father came halfway up the stairs. "What, again? Was he going to steal my newest invention too?"

Helen shook her head. "He was going to kill you."

Her father blinked. "Oh. Well then. Thank you, dear. What was he going to kill me for?"

"Apparently you're going to the future, on Europa?" Helen said, gesturing vaguely. "You're going to give some people a disease? Lots of them will die? The guy wanted to save them."

"Oh, I see. Well, I won't travel without adequate quarantine, then. And... I suppose if they don't die, then in the future the same person might well be born... mightn't he? Or he'll be prevented altogether, but either way he's unlikely to return to the past and try to kill me, so there is a sense in which you didn't truly... kill... someone who exists... but... How have we not been obliterated by a paradox? Dear, do you know? I was hoping to finish my machine today but if I need to spend all afternoon on math..."

Helen shrugged. "Apparently," she said, "it's safe if you get the information via time travel."

"I see. Will I need to brainwash a new therapist for you?" he asked, brow furrowing with concern.

"I think I'm okay," she said. "Easier the second time. I kind of wish you'd stop attracting assassins, though, Dad."

"You don't really need to take it upon yourself to protect me, Helen dear," he said, smiling indulgently. "But thank you."

"You're welcome, Dad," Helen said. "Love you." He took that as a dismissal and turned to go back into the basement, muttering about coefficients. Helen lugged her backpack upstairs and started her homework.

Earthfic

This is a short story. If you have been linked to it in lieu of a definition of its title, here is the definition of the title (though I welcome you to also read the story):

earth·fic (noun): a work of fiction which takes place in "the real world", without invention of a setting. Approximately mutually exhaustive with "speculative fiction". Compare "litfic".

This story has been [translated into Russian](#) by Sithoid. This story is also available as a voice-acted [podcast](#) courtesy of Eneasz.

"You could have the dog talk," suggested Lanie.

"I can't have the dog talk. That would completely change what it means about the character, that he talks to his dog," said Harriet. "If he talks to a dog that talks back, then he's not a guy who's lonely enough to talk to his dog. He's just a guy with a dog that, for some reason, talks. It would be rude *not* to talk to a dog that talks."

"I'm just saying," said Lanie, "that there are things you could *do* to the story to make it publishable, without changing it all *that* much. So the dog can't talk, but there's a hundred other things. Set it ten, fifteen years in the future, sprinkle it with some gadgets for color. Make everybody an anthropomorphic skink. Have them live on Mars in an alternate universe where we colonized it in 1983. Or *not* on Mars in an alternate un-"

"My story isn't *about* people in 2026, or about skinks, or about Martians," interrupted Harriet, breaking eye contact and twisting the ball of her foot into the carpet.

Lanie shrugged, gave up, and put the manuscript back on the coffee table. "I do *like* it," she said softly, and she let herself out of the apartment and left Harriet alone.

Harriet's roommate was home half an hour later, excessive amounts of Chinese takeout dangling from both hands and his mouth. "Fffoo," he said, and then he released the baggage onto the kitchen counter and took in Harriet, the manuscript in her hands, and the neatly arranged cushions that neither resident ever organized. "Food," he clarified, and then, "Your sister was here, and told you nobody publishes earthfic, just like *I* told you, right?"

"That's why they pay you the big bucks, Mr. Dawes, clever deductions like that," said Harriet, dropping the printout back onto the table. "You're Sherlock Holmes. Oh, wait, I can't make that reference, can't possibly have read Sherlock Holmes, because nobody publishes -"

"Harriet," said Dawes. "I'll thank you to remember that we *met* in Literary History. Also, the "mister" thing, not so cute."

"Fine, Mrs. Dawes," she said, getting him to roll his eyes. "People *used* to publish earthfic, is my point."

"People still do, to be fair, they just do it on earthfiction.net instead of in print," he said. "You could say that people no longer pay *money* for it, but *publishing*, that you could do."

Harriet scowled. Her earthfiction.net account had a bunch of short stories on it, but she was holding a *novel*, an honest-to-goodness *novel* in her *hands* that she *wrote* and so what if the dog didn't talk, it was *good*. "Don't you like the book?" she asked.

"Nope. I missed a midterm to find out how it ends because I hate your book, Harriet. That is how much I hate it. I hated your book so much that I'm going to punish you with wontons." Dawes handed her a carton of punishment and a pair of chopsticks, and Harriet

began mechanically chewing on the dumplings, watching her roommate to see what he'd say with the sarcasm out of his system. "Look, I *like* earthfic. And your book is right up there with some of the best stuff I've seen, although I kinda wish you'd pick a title and stick with it. But what am I supposed to do? I don't run a publishing house."

"I know. I thought Lanie might have pitched it to her agent, but -"

"Agent?" said Dawes.

"I told you Lanie writes," said Harriet. She picked at the corner of the cover page in front of her with six crossed-out titles, wondering if she could grab someone's attention from a slush pile with something catchy. Something that pretended to an inventive setting. Something with the word *enchanted* or *space*, or some four-digit number hinting at a year that wasn't the current one.

"You told me she writes. *You* write. *You* don't have an agent," Dawes said around half an eggroll.

"And you didn't think my advance reader copies of all the Melanie Nelson books were suggestive of anything?" Harriet asked skeptically.

"Melanie Nelson... Me- *Lanie* Nelson," said Dawes. "Christ. You have *Melanie Nelson* on speed dial."

"In theory, she'll help me if I need help," said Harriet sourly. "I thought you knew. I think I've told you her married name before."

"I never made the leap," said Dawes, sounding stunned. "Wow. It must run in the family, I guess?"

Harriet huffed and tried to poke a hole in her last wonton with the end of a chopstick. "Lanie writes *high fantasy*. I don't."

"Why don't you?" asked Dawes. "You could just tweak the book a little. Hey, I know - the dog could -"

"Shut *up*," said Harriet.

He shrugged. "She can't really pitch earthfic to her high fantasy agent or her high fantasy publisher, can she? It'd be pointless. They'd be all, "Well, Mrs. Nelson, your sister certainly seems to have a solid grasp of character, pacing, word choice, plot, and mood, but this story has no worldbuilding, so please, do let us know when she writes a real book, one that's less derivative and shows that she can create her own settings" and your sister has clout, I imagine, but not enough to change their business model. The business model that puts *her* on shelves."

Harriet's hands clenched steadily tighter on her knees as Dawes speculated. "There's nothing *unreal* about my book."

"Which is the entire problem," declared Dawes. "Anybody could travel to Minnesota -"

"It's set in Montana, Dawes, you *read* it -"

"To a state the name of which begins with an M," Dawes continued, "and meet real live people who really talk to their dogs and really work as actuaries and really suffer from - hang on, I'm trying to think of an amusing way to get this wrong - nope, I fail. Suffer from blindness. It costs a plane ticket and some looking, but there's a dude wandering around out in the world suspiciously like your protagonist, even if you made him up."

"Does that make the story any less interesting?" challenged Harriet. "Or even less *fictional*? There might not be a guy like him. If there is, he's not why I wrote the character that way."

"Okay, geez," said Dawes, holding up his hands. "I am not the incarnation of the traditional publishing industry, nor do I have the

wherewithal to alter said industry. Shouting at me will not help you get your novel in stores unless you also want to take my suggestion about how the dog could -"

"The dog *does not talk*," Harriet snapped.

"I was going to say "do math", actually," said Dawes. "It could help with the actuary thing."

"It doesn't do math either. It's a dog." She finished her wontons and shoved the box away. "I'm going up to campus."

"Okay," said Dawes. He was halfway through the fried rice. "Later."

Harriet didn't have any classes for the rest of the day. She was a week behind on reading for her Shakespeare class and hadn't run off a copy of the commentary they were using yet, but she didn't head for the library. She didn't want to stop at her usual café haunt either, because they sold pastries there, and even full of wontons she'd wind up buying one and then regretting it. Instead she went to the little cluster of trees around a bench with someone's name on it that she'd never read.

It was already occupied.

"Harriet," said Lanie, surprised.

"Lanie." Harriet tilted her head, and then sat, nudging her sister over with her knee. "You didn't go home?"

Lanie shrugged. "It's empty right now. No reason to go there instead of here, as long as the weather's nice."

"Dawes didn't know you were Melanie Nelson," Harriet said. Lanie didn't have anything to say in reply, so Harriet changed the subject again. "I don't want to change the story in some pointless way that

it doesn't *need* to make it *respectable* . But I don't want it relegated to obscurity either."

"I wish I could help, Harriet. But I don't think my imprint would take earthfic even if *I* wrote it."

"I was thinking I could mess with the title," Harriet said. "Just the title. It wouldn't be actually *wrong* for the book to call it something like -"

"Harriet," said Lanie reproachfully. "If you just want my agent to *read your story* , print out a spare copy and I will get him to *read* it. You don't need to cheat your way out of the slush pile. *That's* not your obstacle, unless you've sprouted an objection to nepotism in the last twenty minutes. But pretending to be maybe-not-earthfic for the first chapter - or ten, I published a book that didn't have the faerie realms doing anything of consequence until chapter eleven - won't get you in print. I don't have a way to turn earthfic into a new niche."

"It doesn't need a speculative element," said Harriet, stubborn. "It doesn't *need* it. This is *ridiculous* . A hundred and fifty years ago earthfic wasn't considered so low-status."

"The funny thing is, in every other way but worldbuilding, you're a better writer than me," said Lanie.

Harriet looked over at her sister with surprise. "You're joking. I'm not."

"Well, you don't have an editor," Lanie said. "If you saw my drafts before she hacks them to bits you'd laugh. I should credit her as coauthor, honestly." She sighed and worried her lip, looking up at the trees. "I know you don't want to go to a vanity press, or I'd buy you cover art and a small print run for your birthday, but -"

"Ugh," inserted Harriet.

"But, even if this *particular* novel has to be on earthfiction.net only, you can still write in the publishable genres."

"I don't know," Harriet said, looking sadly at Lanie. "I'm no good at that sort of thing. I doubt I could even make a superficial change to the existing book that didn't ring false - like you suggested putting it in 2026 or something, but I don't know what 2026 will be like, it's sure to be *laughably* wrong if I guess. And then my decently polished, thematically whole earthfic turns into bad near-proximity sci-fi *lousy* with obvious, tacked-on technology with bumped up version numbers and computationally intractable imaginary features."

"I could authorize you to do shared world fiction," offered Lanie tentatively. "You can have all my notes on the faerie realms and do a Ruby Faerie Realm book - then it's not earthfic, and you don't have to tack on spec stuff to a story that grew without it, and you don't have to do worldbuilding. Although you really should learn, it's a core skill. I couldn't write earthfic if I tried, it'd be like writing a story without any characters in it."

"Shared world..." Harriet mused, ignoring the thousandth encouragement from the aggregate population of Lanie, their parents, every creative writing teacher ever, and the bewildering percentage of earthfiction.net reviewers who were looking forward to her talents being turned to "serious" fiction so they could recommend her to their friends who wouldn't suffer earthfic to clutter their reading lists.

"I kept the sharing authorization rights for Ruby Faerie Realm," Lanie said. "I couldn't let you do Spiderworld or Mercury Maze without checking with the publishing house, and they'd probably say no for a debut author - although I'll try if you'd really rather do one of those - but you can do Ruby Faerie stories all you want, and I can make my agent read them and talk my editor into backing them and they *won't* be dismissed as earthfic."

Harriet clutched her wrists and leaned her forearms on her thighs. "Maybe," she said, at length. "I wish *this* book could be on shelves."

"Harriet. I like your book. I really, honestly like it. But *I'm* not a Ruby Faerie and I cannot mind-control my publisher for you. What are you trying to accomplish, mourning your earthfic? You're twenty-one, for crying out loud, you have lots more books to write if writing is what you want to do. If you want your name in print you have to live with the market."

On one level Harriet knew she was being petulant, and Lanie was being more helpful than she had to be, and that while writing a Ruby Faerie book would be *harder* than writing earthfic, it would also be much, much likelier to establish her as a serious author among people who mattered.

On another level, she was *really* attached to her first novel.

"Ugh," she said again.

"Think about it," said Lanie. "I'll e-mail you my notes. You can ask any questions you want about the Realm and I'll tell you the answers. I don't know what else to do for you, Harriet - I'd offer outright coauthorship on something but I don't expect to have the time to start a new project for the next year."

"I'll think about it," Harriet agreed.

"What were you going to write next, anyway?"

Harriet muttered a synopsis of a novelette starring a med student and a single mother, but she wasn't that enthusiastic about the plot she had in mind. She did like the characters... and the Ruby Faerie Realms intersected with a fairly normal Earth in places. The characters could stay. "Maybe I could fold them into a Realm book," she mumbled. "They could do something faerieish."

"There you go," said Lanie. "That sounds great. Look, I'm starving. I'm going to go home and polish off some leftovers. You'll have the notes by tomorrow morning, okay?"

"Okay," said Harriet.

Lanie hugged her and left, and Harriet sat on the bench until it got dark and then walked back to her apartment.

When Harriet got home, Dawes was reading her copy of *Ruby Faerie Prince*. "I'm going to need that soonish," she said, having made up her mind to at least *try* putting her med student and single mom in a Realm-related plot.

"What for?" he asked. "Hey, can you ask your sister why the Prince didn't bother warning Penelope about the brackish demons when he brought her to -"

"Because there's about five thousand things that could kill you in the Realm, and she barely listened to him when he told her the most probable hazards, so he figured it'd be better overall to leave her for five minutes while he got her an amulet," said Harriet tiredly. She'd thought Dawes had known about her sister, and just didn't feel inclined to relay a lot of questions about the Realm and Spiderworld and the Mercury-goddamn-Maze even though he liked Melanie Nelson books. His lack of *grilling* had been half the reason she'd made friends with him in freshman year. "I'm going to need it because Lanie says I can do shared world Realm stuff."

"Really? That is *awesome*," said Dawes. "Hey, if your sister wrote these why didn't she sign them for you?"

Harriet stuck her head in the fridge so he wouldn't see her roll her eyes, and emerged with juice. "She's my sister. Her signature's not really special to me and it's not like I'm going to sell my books. You could buy your *own* copies and she'd sign them."

"I might do that, at least the faerie books you'll be using. Are you going to put the novel online or sit on it for a while hoping for a miracle?"

"I don't know yet," she said.

"Second thing, then," Dawes said.

Harriet sighed, but didn't have a retort ready. She drank her juice, and added *try outlining realm story* to her to-do list between *attend yoga* and *lunch meeting with Spanish club* .

Before she retreated into her room to turn in for the night, Dawes returned her copy of *Prince* , and she put it back on the shelf next to *Ruby Faerie Regent* and *Ruby Faerie Usurper* . (*Usurper* wasn't actually out yet - Harriet's was the ARC.) Next to the red-spined faerie series were *Spiderworld* and *Spiderworld's Net* and *Into the Mercury Maze* . Lanie was almost a decade older than Harriet and had started writing at the same age as her sister, finished a novel at the same age as her sister...

Only, *Lanie'd* had the fortune to choose a marketable genre. To be good at a marketable genre.

Harriet looked at the shelf of Melanie Nelson books for a long moment, and then switched off the lights and got into bed before her eyes adjusted.

Harriet had her creative writing seminar first thing the next morning, and brought her manuscript, though no one in the class had been interested before it was finished and she didn't think it likely that they'd want to read it just because it was done. It was currently titled "Seeing-Eye Dog". She expected she'd cycle through three more titles by the end of the day.

The seminar met once a week, and was worth a credit hour with regular attendance, but it was small and informal compared to most of Harriet's classes, and they usually met outdoors when the weather permitted. She found Professor Ngo sitting on the same bench where she'd met Lanie the prior evening, talking to two students who'd arrived earlier. Harriet sat on the grass next to one of them, who was talking about his space opera novelette. The other student interrupted with a comparison to her time travel short. Harriet resisted the urge to glower.

The six other students in the seminar trickled in, and Professor Ngo passed out handouts, which were about realistic dialogue. For someone who held earthfic in as much contempt as did the general population, Harriet thought, Ngo talked about *realism* a lot...

Every week, there were twenty minutes left after Professor Ngo's planned lesson. These were taken up by discussion about the students' own projects. Harriet had spoken up about her novel... once. Her classmates had laughed at her and Professor Ngo - sounding like she was trying to be kind - informed Harriet that she was in *college* now.

Harriet fidgeted in her seat, listening to progress reports on an alternate history and a steampunk romance and an urban fantasy and a post-apocalypse dystopia.

"Harriet?" asked Professor Ngo tentatively, when everyone else was done. She always asked.

"I'm going to start a new project today," said Harriet, resisting the temptation to shriek *I finished a novel, none of the others ever finished a novel, damn it* -

"What is it?" prompted the professor, tentatively, obviously hoping that it wasn't more earthfic.

Harriet twisted her hands in her lap. She didn't want Ngo to *smile* at her, didn't want to be taken seriously *only* because her new project wasn't earthfic.

Except that she also did. She wanted to look her teacher in the eye and name her next work and have everybody in the class know that she was probably going to be published (*because your sister has connections* , said Harriet's brain mutinously, but still).

The professor looked at her expectantly.

"I'm starting a new story today," Harriet said, and her voice only trembled a little bit. "It's shared-world of the Ruby Faerie Realm."

"Oh, how lovely," said Professor Ngo, beaming. "What do you have planned for it?"

And Harriet told her about the characters she was importing from the old story, and that she still had to figure out where the faeries came in, but was going to outline it right after yoga, and she avoided looking any of her classmates in the eye.

The class dispersed; Harriet heard footsteps behind her like Professor Ngo wanted to catch up to her and put a hand on her shoulder and *congratulate* her, but she sped up and didn't feel such a hand fall.

Yoga passed, and Harriet sat in the cafeteria, waiting for Spanish club, staring at her notebook.

She didn't think Ruby Faerie Realm stories were *inferior* to earthfiction. She *liked* her sister's work.

She *didn't* think they were worse. But it felt like she *should* , just to counterbalance everyone else.

She regretted telling the seminar about her new project. They'd looked at her like the correct response was *aw, she's maturing as a writer, look*, not *she's trying a new area, no better or worse, just new*.

It didn't help that she was mostly doing the Realm story because she thought it would get her published, rather than for the creative stretching implied by *either* thought.

Harriet tapped her pencil on the notebook and sighed and started sketching a loose outline of a plot that suited her characters and incorporated enough faeries that they wouldn't feel extraneous.

That afternoon, she typed up the outline and sent it to Lanie. *Not expecting you to hold my hand through the actual writing, I just want a once-over on the plot skeleton*, she added. *Like if I missed some problem that the faeries would just fix by gemcasting something*.

Lanie answered her after dinner: *Looks awesome, have fun with it :)*. Harriet stared at her computer screen. Dawes was playing loud symphonic metal in his room. The manuscript of Harriet's novel - she'd settled on titling it "Actuation" and hadn't changed it since Spanish club - was leaning over, trying to slide out of its binder clips, in her bag.

Harriet opened the file on her laptop, updated the title, and uploaded it to earthfiction.net. She considered putting a little note in her author profile while she was there: "Keep an eye out for my next project - it's Ruby Faerie Realm shared-world! I'm authorized and you can expect it on shelves if everything goes according to plan!" She opened the editing box and the cursor blinked expectantly at her.

Then she closed it, and pounded out three thousand words of a first draft of chapter one of her Realm book, and went to bed.

In the morning, "Actuation" had two new reviews attached to early chapters. One was standard illiteracy - "u kep up the good wrk plz sequel? read my fic TEh Pet Store also r&r". The other was flaming her about some minor factual error regarding the geography of Montana, which she fixed without replying to the reviewer.

Harriet wrote another thousand words in her draft, then wrote to Lanie: *What kind of feedback do you usually get on your books?*

Lanie didn't get a chance to answer until midafternoon, by which time Harriet had sat through her Hispanophone Literature course and her art elective in ceramics. Lanie's reply read, *My agent filters out the unreadable stuff (though he passes on the really hilarious ones) so I mostly just see nice things. Somebody named their baby Penelope after the character, people want stuff autographed - my agent has to filter a lot of that too b/c we can't provide our own postage for everything, they have to do it - somebody once told me they set the Mercury Chant to music and sent me a CD, it was pretty. Why?*

Harriet didn't answer right away; she had six more comments on "Actuation". They ran the gamut from more incoherent squealing to a notification that she'd been listed on someone's recommendation hub to a glowing review of the treatment of blindness: *I'm sick of reading blind characters in mainstream stuff because there's always some doodad or spell that can cure them or they have a magic power that makes them practically speaking not blind, and that's not gonna happen to me anytime soon, it's great to see a regular blind character who's going to stay that way but gets along fine, thank you :D*

She answered her sister. *Just curious about how it compares to the stuff people are saying on ef.net is all.*

Come over to dinner tonight, Lanie wrote back. *Me and your brother-in-law would love to have you. Spaghetti squash <3*

Harriet tapped her fingers on the keyboard, typed *awesome, pick me up whenever*, and went back to her Realm draft. If she gave the antagonist enough graphite dust - maybe he should have access to a pencil factory - he could choke off the faeries' flashier powers at will... that made it easier not to solve all the problems by magic. The humans could do things. They could have realistic problems. And some of the characters would have wings and complain about there being too much graphite dust for them to gemcast, that was all.

She started chapter two. It had faeries in it. But she could still do what she was good at. She could keep *most* of what she liked about earthfic. Harriet chewed on her lip, then went back and edited in a limp for the female protagonist's son, which he was going to keep through the entire book.

She had a lot of writing left in her.

Expense

This story is also available in audio, which you may find on [this episode of Wingardcast](#).

The immortal was a little grey lady in an outfit so outdated that it would have looked more suitable in a Renaissance faire than in the nursing home that would have suited the woman herself. Skirts atwirl, she swished over to her captive with a sigh and touched his face. He was generically handsome, hadn't shaved in a couple of days, and bore a look of utter panic.

"I thought you were a myth," he choked.

"No," she said kindly. "I'm sorry."

"Please let me go."

"No," she said again.

"Why do you do this?" he cried.

"If I didn't," she said, patting his hair with a critical expression, "I'd die."

"But if you do I'll die."

"That's true," she acknowledged. "It's you or me. I don't take people with families, you know. It's just the two of us."

"But I want to live!" he wailed.

"So do I," she cooed. "I think I'll get a haircut..."

"You've had God only knows how many centuries...!"

"Mmm... nine and a half," she said, after a moment's thought.

"Isn't that *enough*?" he begged.

"Not if you're doing it right," she said with satisfaction, looking up at the ceiling.

"I have a full life ahead of me..."

"Me too!" she said. "A fuller one, really. Without me, you'd still die, you realize. It would take a bit longer, but... if you do it right... you won't be any more interested in dying then. Without you, though, I would miss out on an eternity. Just think! So much to do and see."

"But you have no right."

"Do you?"

" Yes !"

"I guess we'll agree to disagree, then," she said, sitting down on the little stool before where he was chained up. She smoothed her skirts. "I hope the moths don't get these while they're put away... you haven't the figure for them at *all* ; don't take that as an insult."

"Find someone else," he pleaded. "Someone who doesn't care if they die."

"Now, that would be irresponsible of me," she said severely. "Preying on the mentally ill! I hope you don't think they're less deserving than you."

This statement so baffled him that he left off arguing with her for a short time.

"I think I'm rather nice, considering," she said. "I don't kill people *gratuitously* . I wait until I'm good and old. I once spent forty years missing a leg, and that was before all the fancy prostheses and laws

about handicapped accessibility. I could have taken another body then, but no, I waited until it just wasn't safe any more. This one's going to have a stroke any minute now, and let me tell you, it's not because I don't eat right!"

"But you don't have to kill people at all," he said.

"I do if I want to live. I tried to move into a bird once. Tried a cat, tried a few other things - doesn't work."

"Haven't you tried just *not moving into anyone*?"

"Can't say it crossed my mind. I'm not suicidal, you know," she says. "The way I see it, this is just self-defense. I mean, if I were to let you go, now, wouldn't you try to kill me? Or, maybe you wouldn't - but say I let you go and then had a heart attack. There's a phone on the wall. It's hooked up. Would you call me an ambulance?" He didn't answer her. "So I could let you let me die and then, eventually, after a good long run, you'd die too. Or I could move in and have - oh, you're probably good for sixty more years! And I can carry on indefinitely."

He sobbed, and she patted his cheek sympathetically. "It's all right, darling. Doesn't hurt a bit," she murmured. "Is there anything you'd liked tidied up for you after I've moved you out? Letters that need sending, charities you want me to send your things to? I'm not going to keep them. That would be stealing."

His head drooped. He muttered a nonprofit's name, and she nodded sagely. "You have my word," she said.

She laid her palms on his skull and closed her eyes.

Half an hour later, the timer on the restraints made a small beep and he was released. He got to his feet, picked up the corpse in front of him, and carried her out to the ready-made grave in the backyard.

Damage Report

Key went to the library on most Tuesdays and Fridays, but ey considered skipping the week ey turned eight. Ey turned over the pros and cons in eir mind, then finally put on eir favorite fuzzy coat and walked the four blocks to the swooping blue-glass structure. Key headed first, as always, for the computers that sat on the gappy spiral arrangement of desks in the circle of the main floor. There were books, in the basement, but although they smelled nice, that had never seemed to recommend them as sources of information.

On this day, though, before sliding into a chair and looking for something eir permissions would open that ey hadn't already studied or deemed uninteresting, Key turned abruptly in eir course. There was a librarian, not far from the side door. Key had always thought of the librarians as being there for the sorts of patrons who liked to check out books, and ey hadn't bothered with them before. But on this occasion, ey wanted to complain about being confined to the tame information on the computer. Ey wasn't allowed to retake the EQ test again for nearly four months or the conceptual sophistication test for five, and that was an intolerable wait even if ey did wind up passing on those attempts.

"Excuse me," said Key, addressing the librarian. She had on a nametag; "Lace," continued Key, remembering a tidbit from something on psychology ey'd read once.

"What can I do for you?" asked Lace, smiling. "Decided you want to go the old-fashioned route and find a book today?"

"No, thank you," said Key. "I wanted to ask about the permissions on the computers. I can't take the tests again for months and I'm getting so tired of what's on my guidelist."

"Oh, I see. What's your guide level?" Lace asked, looking thoughtful. Key told her, making a face. Then Lace asked for eir name, which Key supplied. "There you go," said Lace, tapping a few things on her own computer.

"Huh?" said Key.

"I derestricted your guidelist. The level-appropriate topics will still appear more prominently, but you can get at a wider range now, on the library consoles. Have fun, Key."

"You can do that?"

"If you didn't know I could do that, why did you come to ask me about it?" said Lace mildly. "The guidelists are only weakly-enforced recommendations. I have some discretion over what people use our library for."

"Oh," said Key, a bit stunned by this turn of events. Ey thanked Lace and resumed eir original heading, towards eir favorite computer. They were all the same, but Key's usual choice was the one from which ey could easily see the park across the road.

Ey let the computer scan eir retina, and then went straight for eir modified guidelist. True to her word, Lace had lifted the barrier to Key's further exploration: the bright blue, bolded topics were the ones ey'd read before, but nestled alphabetically between them, in gray, were new top-level topics and even new subheadings to the old ones. Key was reminded of the last time eir guidelist had expanded, but this was a far greater increase - at least four-fifths of the new links were grey. No wonder those tests ey'd failed had been so hard.

Key clicked a new link near the top, with a word ey'd never seen before: "Anesthesia".

"So guess what," Key said to eir friend Trellis when they met at the playground the subsequent morning.

"You decided what you want to be when you grow up?" guessed Trellis.

"No," said Key. "Want a hint?"

"I can guess," giggled the other child, swinging around to hang by eir knees from a bar on the climbing structure. "You're going to have a new sibling?"

"How did - your *mom* told you that," accused Key. "She had lunch with my mom yesterday."

"Yeah," Trellis admitted. "Is that what you were going to say, though?"

"No. I mean, I was going to tell you that, but that wasn't what I was thinking first. I was at the library yesterday -"

"Uh, yeah, yesterday was Tuesday," said Trellis. Ey grabbed the next bar and dangled from eir arms, then dropped to the ground. "You *always* go to the library when it's Tuesday."

"And *at* the library," said Key, "I got a librarian to derestrict my guidelist."

"Wow, really?" Trellis whistled, a feat Key had never been able to duplicate. "So now you can read *anything*?"

"Not *anything* . Just up a level. But it's a huge level. There's five times as much stuff now. So I spent all day reading about this stuff they used to have called 'anesthesia'."

"What's that?" asked Trellis. "Or are you not supposed to tell me? I'm not even at *your* same level."

"The guidelists are only weakly-enforced recommendations," said Key airily, and Trellis snorted. "It was this stuff they used to make pain go away."

"Don't we kind of *need* that?" said Trellis. "If I ever slam my hand in a door again I want to know about it before it gets all infected and gross and falls off."

"No, it was different. Did you go to the hospital when your sibling was born?" asked Key, and Trellis nodded. "They would've put eir neuro in right then. And then your mom and dad would've gotten copies of eir damage reports until ey passed the first prudence test because little kids are bad about taking care of themselves."

"My mom and dad are *still* getting copies of Arbor's damage reports. Ey doesn't test very well," laughed Trellis.

"Whatever," said Key, motioning towards the swings; Trellis followed readily, and soon they were pumping themselves high into the air. "So the neuro isn't a natural thing. They don't know how to make it so we're born with them yet. And for a long time they couldn't even make them in the first place."

"So people would just have to - what, look real carefully in the mirror twice a day to make sure they hadn't hurt themselves?" scoffed Trellis. "Come on, I'm not at your level, but I'm allowed to read about *evolution*. Even *animals* can tell when they're damaged. Our ancestors would all have been dead in a minute if they couldn't."

"What the neuro does isn't just to tell you when you're damaged," said Key. "It tells you that *instead* of letting you feel what they used to call pain. We only call damage "painful" now because we don't have any use for the old meaning - except veterinarians; they still use it technically because animals don't get neuros."

"Okay, so - what's the techy vet sense of pain?" asked Trellis.

"I don't know," admitted Key. "It's just some feeling that nobody liked, so they invented neuros and got rid of it and now we have damage reports without that feeling, instead."

"That's weird stuff, all right," said Trellis. "I wonder why it's at that high a level, though? I mean, if they didn't have neuros, that means none for kids either, right? So kids used to know about this stuff and actually had to feel it."

"Yeah, it's kind of weird," said Key. Ey started to slow eir swinging, dragging eir shoes, but caught a foot wrong on the ground and pitched forward onto eir face. Ey was promptly made aware of the shallow scrapes on eir cheeks: an awareness that was only unpleasant inasmuch as it meant that ey had better interrupt eir playground visit. "Now I have to go home and disinfect these," ey grumbled. With a little twist of the attention, Key's neuro let eir awareness of the injuries fade to the same background importance as the snugness of eir shoes, and ey started for home to clean up the scrapes. "I'll see you later, Trellis."

"See you, Key," said Trellis, still swinging.

Key went to the library on Thursday. Ey waved to Lace, but headed straight for eir favorite computer and picked up where ey'd left off on the articles about anesthesia. Ey was quite absorbed for the first hour or so, when ey was jolted out of this reverie by a bewildering chapter heading: "Moral Resistance to Anesthesia".

Key's first thought was that this was a pun of some kind, although ey couldn't think how. Puzzled, ey read on, and found that it was no such thing. There had really been opposition to the soothing of pain with even the most harmless of drugs, and not all of it was practical concerns about long term health.

"There were," read the screen before Key's bewildered eyes, "critics who argued that pain was an essential component of the human

condition."

Eir first reaction was to dismiss those critics as obviously insane. Everybody, it had been made quite clear in eir earlier reading, *hated* pain, and this wasn't uninformed prejudice - there were no neuros; no one was lucky enough to escape every injury and disease; they *knew* what they were arguing to keep. But then - Key emself *didn't* know what it was. Ey'd never felt it. Maybe ey *was* missing something important.

Key backed up out of the anesthesia articles and looked up information on neuros. Ey found what ey was looking for soon enough. They *could* be disabled (and - ey checked carefully - turned right back on again). Eir derestricted access let em follow a path right to the tailor-made pixel code that, when ey looked at it, would turn off the neuro; there was a corresponding restoration page, but Key didn't want that one yet. Ey clicked the first link and verified eir identity again. An array of colors flared briefly onto the screen. It didn't feel like anything. Key reached up to eir face and pulled at one of the half-healed scrapes.

Ey couldn't help but emit a yelp and jerk eir hand away. The sensation partly subsided, but it didn't vanish completely. Desperately, ey tried to push it into the background with the familiar twist of awareness, but it didn't respond - that too was a function of the neuro. Key reached forward to the screen, staring anxiously as it loaded the second pixel code and restored power to the merciful implant. Immediately, the scratches registered only the familiar awareness that they were there and might warrant action from Key. Ey dismissed that. Ey wasn't curious at all about the *scratches*. Ey was gaping open-mouthed at the screen, which minutes earlier had told em that people - people *without neuros*, who had *felt* exactly that - had wanted it. Had wished it on *other people*. Had, knowing as they must have that they might eventually need surgery themselves, chosen to guarantee that in such a case they'd experience *that*. More of it than Key had. The scratches were small.

Doing *surgery* on someone like that... Key started navigating back to the article ey'd been in the middle of. Maybe they'd had these people committed. Maybe they'd all been clapped away to receive such psychiatric treatment as had been available back then, the moment this insanity had manifested itself.

Before Key had made eir way back to the page, ey felt a hand on eir shoulder. Ey looked up - it was Lace. "Are you all right, Key?" asked the librarian.

Key didn't answer, just looked up at Lace with huge, confused eyes.

"I'd feel responsible if you were disturbed by something that I released to you," Lace said. "The computers forward access logs to the central library records. I can see what you've been looking at, if I need to."

"I was reading about anesthesia," said Key.

"And that made you scream?" asked Lace.

"Sort of," Key said.

"Did you turn off your neuro?"

"How did you know?" asked Key, staring at the librarian.

"Just a guess," said Lace, smiling faintly. "You got it back on?" Key nodded. "Good."

"Did you do it too?" Key asked impulsively. Lace didn't answer, but the little frown on her face told Key enough. "Do you know," ey continued eagerly, "why there would have been anybody who didn't want anesthesia?"

"It's hard to imagine, isn't it? There was similar opposition to neuros, when they were invented," said Lace.

"But that doesn't make any *sense* . Why would anybody who knew what it was like want it to keep happening? How could somebody feel something *that awful* and not want to make it go away forever?" Key pleaded.

"It's a mystery to me," said Lace. "Maybe it's a matter of being used to it."

"But they can't have gotten really used to it, or it'd stop working as a damage report," protested Key.

"A matter of thinking it's normal, then," amended Lace. Key got up out of eir chair, shaking eir head, and headed for the door. "See you tomorrow," Lace called after em.

"You did *what* ?" exclaimed Trellis, after Key had joined em at the playground and related the events of the morning. Trellis was so surprised that ey nearly slid off the seesaw.

"You heard me," Key said.

"I want to try!" Trellis cried, reasserting eir hold on the seesaw handle and pushing off. Key, accordingly, descended.

"No," said Key emphatically. "You don't. Trust me. You *really don't* ."

"You did," Trellis said.

"And now I know better. Are your parents still getting copies of your damage reports too? I'm telling you it's awful and you should never do it."

"They are *not* . I passed the prudence test when I was four. A month before *you* did, so there."

"You're five months older than me," said Key. "Anyway, just don't. You can't get at it until you pass more tests, anyway."

Trellis sighed. "Fine. Hey, when your mom went to the doctor about your new sibling, did you go?"

"Yeah," said Key. "Why?"

"When it was Arbor, my parents left me with your mom, remember? And I asked my dad why and he said he didn't want me confused about anything, which was kind of not helpful in the not confusing me department, so anyway - I wanted to know if you knew what goes on that they wouldn't have wanted me there for."

"Umm..." Key considered whether there was anything unsuitable for small children that ey'd encountered. "The doctor *did* ask my mom if she wanted a boy or a girl."

"They *did* ? But nobody does that anymore."

"I guess somebody must," said Key. "I didn't know they still asked about it, though, I figured they just assumed you'd want a regular kid unless you told them different. It might have been just the one doctor."

Trellis shook eir head. "It's really weird they even let people do that still. *I* don't even know what I want to be when I grow up *now* . It's not like my parents would have known before I was even born. What do you want to be?"

"Dunno," said Key.

"I'm tired of see-sawing," announced Trellis. "Let's go to your house and make cupcakes." Key acquiesced, and the rest of the afternoon passed in a haze of flour.

Key was at the library when ey heard about the accident. Ey was taking a break from the academics, and instead simply playing solitaire and poking around at news. It was the latter activity that led em to the headline: "Mishap at Power Plant Leads to Radiation Poisoning of Local Child". In the two lines of summary between that headline and the next was Trellis's name.

Key touched the headline automatically, only managing to focus eir eyes on the text after eir mind caught up with the title. Trellis had visited the plant to watch the machines at work. Easily a hundred children went there every week, but usually with official tour groups, and there had been none that day for a reason. Trellis had ignored or misunderstood the signs, probably had to climb over some guardrails - but of course there was no one in the building to spot em and tell em why the place was deserted except for scrubber robots. And someone had forgotten to lock the door.

Key didn't bother to log out. Ey just bolted.

The hospital was only three blocks from the library, and Key was fast. A nurse held em up briefly near the entrance, but eventually supplied the room number. Trellis's parents and sibling were already there, and didn't object to Key's presence.

Trellis was awake. Ey cracked a smile when Key came in. "Did your mom go find you at the library or something?" ey asked.

"No, I saw it on the news."

"I'm glad you're here," said Trellis.

Medicine had advanced considerably since the era Key had been reading about.

It had not advanced enough.

The fellow who'd left the door unlocked was charged, tried, and sentenced to have his wages garnished for the rest of his life for the benefit of Trellis's family; his employers, for their part, moved him to a job that consisted entirely of paperwork. Trellis's parents offered Key a share of the money, which ey turned down; they offered em a few of Trellis's belongings, mostly decorations that could be expected to last for the rest of Key's life, which ey accepted.

Ey stayed in eir room for a week straight, staring at the porcelain bird and the stack of variously-sized glass cubes and the posters of the album artwork from Trellis's favorite musicians. Key's mother brought em meals for the first five days; after that, she stopped, and ey grazed on some snacks ey had stashed under eir bed until they ran out and ey was obliged to go down for dinner. Eir mother tried to engage em in conversation about what to name the baby, far in advance though it was. She stopped trying when Key snapped that perhaps she could name em Trellis.

Key stayed in eir house for almost a month. Finally, eir mother picked em up bodily and deposited em in the front garden, then locked the door behind her. Key sat beside the tomato plant until informed by eir neuro that sunburn was beginning to be a concern, and then, finding the house still closed to em, trudged to the library.

Lace was sitting behind her desk. She smiled at Key when ey came in, but furrowed her brow slightly at the stony expression on the child's face.

The computers held nothing of interest for Key. Ey walked over to the librarian. "My friend is dead," ey said baldly.

Lace's eyes went wide, and she got up and came around from behind the desk to give Key a silent hug. After a little while, Key hugged her back, and started to cry.

Noting the puzzled supervision of the other patrons, Lace stood up and took Key's hand to lead em into a staffroom. "My mom," choked

Key when the door had swung shut behind them, "wants me to cheer up and go back to normal. She won't let me back in the house yet because I've been in there for a month."

"Everyone takes different amounts of time to start functioning again, after losing a loved one," said Lace carefully.

"Ey's *dead* . Ey's never going to start *functioning again* ," said Key. "Ey was just a kid."

"Yes, people often find it particularly sad when children die," Lace agreed.

"And it was a stupid accident," said Key.

"Having no time to anticipate it can make it seem worse."

Key looked suspiciously at the librarian. "You sound like you're trying not to say something."

"A little," admitted Lace. "Now isn't a good time..."

"No, say it," demanded Key.

"I can't say it directly, or it wouldn't make any sense," said Lace. "Tell me - if Trellis had lived to be very old, and so had you, and ey'd still died first, of old age - say at a hundred and twenty, if you like - would you have been happy?"

"What kind of stupid question is that? Of course I'd be sad. Ey'd still have been my friend."

"But then ey wouldn't have been a kid, and it wouldn't have been a stupid accident," said Lace. "You'd have known it was coming - hardly anyone lives to be more than a hundred and twenty."

"But ey'd still be *dead* ," said Key.

Lace nodded. "Did you know," she said, seeming to change the subject, "that there was a time when scarcely anybody lived to be eighty, let alone a hundred and twenty?"

"Yeah, of course - medicine got better. Things like *anesthesia*," said Key bitterly, associating that research with Trellis's death by mere proximity.

"Right," said Lace, gracefully ignoring the second part of Key's utterance. "And now people often live to be a hundred and twenty, and one made it to a hundred and forty-three, and that's been how it is for a long time now. Why do you think that is?"

"I guess people just don't get any older than that," said Key.

"It used to be that people just didn't get any older than eighty," Lace pointed out.

Key frowned. "Just spit it out, whatever it is."

"You know that there are restrictions on what you can read on the computer. Did you know that's true of *everyone*?"

"But if you pass all the tests, then..."

"If you pass all the tests," said Lace, "then you get the highest access level that anyone has - which *doesn't* let you read everything. There are certain things that are not considered appropriate avenues of research."

"You said the guidelists were pretty much just suggestions," said Key.

"Weakly enforced ones, at that," said Lace, "which is why I can talk to you about this."

"Except you're not, you're just sort of dancing around it."

"All right, then - a long time ago," said Lace, "some people thought that what we ought to be doing was working on how to make people live longer - even forever."

"Forever? But we can't do that," said Key. "People don't live that long, and anyway, then we'd be overpopulated."

"We don't, but perhaps we could," said Lace. "As for overpopulation, well - I'm sure you can think of a dozen solutions."

Ey probably could have, but turned eir face away. "We can't do it. People aren't supposed to be immortal. They're supposed to be born and grow up and get old and die."

"And now you know," murmured Lace.

"I don't know *anything* . You're no help," grouched Key, and ey pushed eir way out of the staffroom to content eirself with mindless electronic amusements.

"How somebody could feel something *that awful* and not want to make it go away forever," murmured the librarian, but Key didn't hear her.

Blue Jewel

If there was some trace of evil in her eyes (they matched, he observed, the lapis lazuli that tiled every surface in her palace), Brian couldn't see it. He had not misidentified her. That much he knew. It was Davina, called still the Blue Jewel, but with such bitter irony that she might as well have been named the Bitch from Hell.

But there had to have been *some* mistake, even if not with his eyes nor her guiltless, perfect face.

"Brian?" she ventured. Her voice was not like bells or chimes or flutes or anything so musical. It wasn't like anything but a voice - a woman's voice, low and with just enough of a rasp to it that it could come only from real air through a real throat. She was supposed to be a monster. Why wasn't she a monster?

"How do you know my name?" The defiance and suspicion was only in the words chosen. His tone might as well have accompanied a concerned inquiry after her health. The look on his face would have been less incongruous if he'd been speaking a proposal of marriage.

"What? Brian, it's me, Davina," she said. Her face was instantly a mask of concern, but Brian's sharp eyes detected hurt beneath, like he'd wounded her and she was trying for his own sake not to be offended. "Christ, Brian, they told me you'd hit your head, but..."

"What?" That had come out of nowhere. Hit his head? Who were "they"? Why was she swearing by a god who'd been so ineffectual for the past decades that his worship had been all but forgotten? Why was he thinking such odd thoughts when he'd been to church just that morning (for it was Sunday), Davina sitting beside him in the pew?

"Brian, do you remember anything?" she pressed. Her eyes were very blue; his vision of everything save those very blue eyes swam. The background could have been white or red or beige or inky black, he had no notion. The church, he remembered suddenly, was grey stone. When he and Davina had moved to Elm Springs they'd chosen a house near that church specifically because it had looked like such a charming place, a calm bubble of the sacred in their new home.

"I remember..." The background resolved itself. Green walls and white décor and instruments of medicine: he was in a hospital (but it didn't look like a hospital, hospitals were brown and crowded and looked like - well, of course they looked like this. This was what hospitals looked like, because he was in a hospital and it looked like this.) "Davina?"

"Oh, thank the Lord, for a moment I was worried you didn't recognize me," she exclaimed, leaning over him - when had he begun lying down? Why did it surprise him that he was lying down, when he was in a hospital and had hit his head? Of course he needed rest.

Why was he holding a sword?

"They said you might hallucinate a bit. You hit your head so hard, it's a miracle you're alive, much less awake," Davina said, answering his question and jogging his memory about who "they" were. They were doctors, because he was in a hospital. He had hit his head.

The sword, clearly, was a hallucination. He wasn't supposed to kill Davina with a sword. She was his wife. Brian twitched his left hand, felt the wedding band press into the skin of his finger. He drew breath, smelled the antiseptic cocktail of fluids and people in various states of disease and disrepair that marked his location.

"Davina"?

That's all, she can do anything but change her name, someone had not told him. That someone, who he was now quite sure had never existed, had not gone on to say if you meet someone named Davina, no matter what, kill her. You're our hope for this decade, Brian. She's only vulnerable once every ten years and then it's back to the hell for everyone if you fail.

Did she have to be so beautiful? It was that that had caught his eye when they'd met in the park, before he fell in love with her for her gentleness and her sincere faith and what the hell? In love with Davina? He was supposed to

go home with her and go back to raising their children as soon as his excruciating headache went away, of course. "Where are the children?" he croaked, not "*die, Blue Jewel*" or "*I'm not fooled by your illusions*" or "*prove that you are my wife, tell me your name is Sarah or Jenny or Chrysanthemum or anything but Davina*".

"Ken and Lois have them," she said soothingly, taking his nearest hand - the one with the ring on it - in hers, picking it up away from the *hallucinated* sword. She adjusted her posture, bumping the bed with her knee, and the "sword" fell off of the bed, landing on linoleum with a clatter Davina didn't seem to hear.

The noise made his head pound and for a moment he saw two pasts stretching out as unlike as curry and custard. Of course he was Brian, husband to Davina and father to their three children (Carly, Martin, and Damien, his memory supplied helpfully, with faces and favorite colors to accompany each name), churchgoer, stock analyst, and head injury patient. Of course he was none of those things but instead Brian of Amron, alone save for his comrades in the eternal endeavor to overthrow Davina the Blue Jewel from her tyrannical reign in her once-a-decade moment of vulnerability. Orphan, bachelor, childless, godless, with no regular employment except trying to train himself to slaughter the delicate dark-haired *blue-eyed* (why blue? Why did her eyes have to be so *blue*?) woman (*demon*

) sitting by his side looking for all the world like she wanted to feed him chicken soup. Not magically fake in him (her *husband* , of all people) a headache to fool him into letting her live. This version of himself was Champion. He had a sword, and he could pick it up and cleave her head from her body. He'd be hailed for a thousand generations to come as the savior of the world, and that gratitude would probably be enough to net him a house half the size of the one he owned with Davina that wouldn't even have plumbing.

And then how would he ever explain to Carly and Martin and Damien (who?) that their mother (ha! The Blue Jewel a *mother* !) had been killed by their delusional father because he had a funny turn after he fell down the steps of their church on his way out the door?

"Davina, darling," croaked Brian, trying to think around the headache. "Tell me your name is... uh... Sarah."

"What?" Perfect, guileless confusion crossed her face. "Sarah? Who's that?"

"Nobody. Just tell me that's your name." Prove it's a stupid dream I had when I went tumbling down the stairs and *hit my head* , and we can go *home* to our *children* , and I can take the week off from *work* , and make love to my *wife* , my beautiful *blue-eyed* -

"It's not. My name's Davina, Brian sweetie, don't you remember? I thought you recognized me..." Worry knitted that painted brow, perfect as the magically sculpted face of an immortal demon face of a woman with parents with such good genes (a decade of memories of his in-laws, charming people if he'd ever met any, marched across his mind) ought to be.

"I recognize you. What's your middle name?" he tried. That wouldn't sound so suspicious to his (enemy) wife. He'd just forgotten her middle name.

"I don't have a middle name - do you mean my *maiden name*?" she asked slowly.

"Yes." Anything but "Davina" or "Blue Jewel", the less appealing of his two histories told him, would be impossible for her to claim as a title -

"Blue. I was born Davina Blue," she said. "You remember *your* last name, I hope? Brian?"

Jewel. (Amron? No, that wasn't a last name, and he wasn't even from "Amron", that place didn't even exist, it was an imaginary city built on the imaginary ruins of Flagstaff, which was in perfectly good repair and had no ruins, and anyway he was from Chicago.) "Jewel," he said. "Davina. Love."

"I'm here, Brian," she murmured in his ear.

"This is going to sound stupid, I know, but will you just say the words 'my name is Sarah'? Please."

"Brian Ammon (*Ammon* ? Was that where he'd gotten that imaginary village?) Jewel, you're either delusional, in which case I shouldn't do any such thing in case it makes you worse, or you're sane and I'm not going to play into whatever nonsense you've decided to worry me with today."

He tipped his head back farther into his pillow, and she moved her foot, ever so innocently, and the sword skittered farther away, inaccessible on the other side of the room. It was a hallucination anyway, so it didn't much matter where it was.

The pasts, one bitter but promising glory, one almost distressingly normal and happy and promising more of the delicious, tantalizing *same* , battled for Brian's allegiance.

One told him to extinguish the loving, human light in those blue eyes. One told him that the sword was not even *there*, that even if he killed the woman bent over him so tenderly it would be no justice and no victory but only murder of the mother of his children. One told him those children were imaginary. One challenged him to find the flaw in his memories of their births, his mental video of the lines deepening on Davina's face and then softening with pride as she held the first and second and third fragile infant.

One told him that if he did not kill her before the time was up, he would certainly die.

The other told him that for that woman, for those children, he ought to be *thrilled* to die. That he was no kind of man if he wanted to end his wife's life to save his own, that he was the worst kind of slime if he would take away the mother of children (not one of them more than six years old) because he'd hit his head falling down the church steps and believed in a ridiculous dystopian fantasy where she starred as the awful tyrant with the awful, beautiful blue eyes.

He didn't want to die; he didn't want to be the latest of a dozen warriors to have failed to topple the Blue Jewel from her lapis throne.

He didn't want some professionally detached messenger to tell Carly that Mommy had gone away forever, and Daddy was also going to have to go away forever because he was the one who had sent away Mommy, and to be good for Ken (Ken was of course Brian's brother, he wasn't an only child, what nonsense) and Lois and look after her brothers.

He didn't want to cut that gorgeous head from those trembling shoulders and watch the light go out in those blue eyes.

"When can we go home, Davina? Did they say?" he asked, pushing away the last of the awful fantasy and looking his wife full in the face, trusting her.

She knew when she had him, of course. He'd debated a bit longer than some, not as long as others, but she had him where she wanted him in the end.

She was kind about it, and let him have the rest of that day with the fictitious life she'd dreamed up to entice him. He went "home" with his head swaddled in bandages, kissed the empty air where her magic met his mind and told him there were children, and fell asleep curled up by her side, one of her hands idly rubbing the sore muscles of his arm - he had not scaled a *mountain* to get to a *palace* made of *lapis lazuli*, nonsense, he'd only fallen down some stairs, he could expect to be sore.

She let him die in his sleep, twisting his neck with a snap, quick and clean and merciful and none the less deadly.

She waited until her invulnerability was returned to her by the dawn before she threw his body from the mountaintop to advertise his failure to the world, which would remain populated by her victims for the next ten years. (And the next, and the next, and the next.)

Then she was aloft. Wind whistled in her ears as she traversed the globe, impossible speed achieved by the dark magic that blazed in her blue eyes. She had lost an entire day, and she had work to do.

Charm

Ketta flipped her hair out of her face and leaned forward a bit to study the sprite's impossibly small face. Every square millimeter was etched with lines of distress. She might not be innocent of the crime, but the only people she was hurting were the consulate's bureaucrats, so Ketta was willing to call it a worthy cause.

"So are you going to help me?" shrilled Mithnee. "Please, I don't know who I'll go to if you won't."

Ketta repressed a wince at the tinny voice of the minute fey. It wasn't Mithnee's fault that she sounded like the world's smallest teakettle. Every species had its quirks, and considering that the last time Ketta had been snapped at about her "human stink" she'd relieved the speaker of a few pints of blood, it would be fairly hypocritical of her to turn around and complain about some poor sprite's voice.

"Yeah, I'll help you," Ketta answered, leaning forward and permitting a grin to spread across her face. "You know the usual price for my assistance, right?"

Mithnee nodded hesitantly, the movement virtually imperceptible. "I don't have it all right now but I heard you had an installment plan and once I'm out of the city I should be able to move funds from -"

"Forget what you've heard. From you I want a charm."

Mithnee's gaudy green-and-gold wings whirred and she rocketed backwards about a foot. "A charm? That's forbidden magic, I can't give you a -"

"You're already in trouble with the consulate and you're not going to get out of here without my help," Ketta replied firmly. "Performing one charm before you go won't get them any madder than they already are and if you didn't think I could smuggle you out of the city safely you wouldn't be here."

Mithnee flew around in a spiral, agitated, but she apparently couldn't come up with an objection to Ketta's logic, because finally she twittered, "Fine. *One* charm - or I'll try it once, anyway. If they're an elf or a vampire or already in love with you it won't work. Who on?"

"I'll show you," said Ketta.

The Twisted Fork was packed any night of the week, but Ketta always went Sundays. Her own schedule was irregular - the odd jobs she did came unexpectedly and could take any amount of time - but Ennec came like clockwork, at ten p.m. on the dot every Sunday. He'd never mentioned to Ketta what he did for a living (and she'd never asked, since then she'd have to concoct an excuse if he turned the question back on her) but whatever it was offered more regular hours than Ketta's work. Since the first time she'd run into him she'd made time most Sundays at ten to drop by the Twisted Fork, but that had been less than a year previously and to hear the bartender tell it, Ennec had never missed a Sunday in almost a decade.

Ketta would never have thought to demand a special price from Mithnee if it hadn't been a Sunday when she'd careened through the air vent, having just barely lost a pack of the consulate's Chasers. A surprising percentage of Ketta's clients showed up while being actively pursued; she supposed that this would probably get her into trouble one day, but so far no one had managed to stumble into her office with Chasers close enough on their heels that they'd been led to Ketta.

I'm just lucky like that, I suppose , Ketta thought to herself as she strolled into the Twisted Fork, permitting her brow to furrow. She should probably move somewhere new, where she'd be harder to find and less likely to act as an emergency hostess for fugitives. Her good fortune couldn't hold much longer. She resolved to put away some money - not that waiving Mithnee's cash payment would help her supplement savings - and move her office as soon as she had enough that it wouldn't mean skipping too many lunches.

"You okay in there?" Ketta murmured under her breath, patting her purse where she'd stashed Mithnee, trusting the hubbub in the bar to keep her unheard, and the cut of her dress to keep anyone from noticing that her lips were moving. A feather-light, reassuring tap on her deliberately placed thumb confirmed that Mithnee wasn't likely to suffocate or be crushed by the purse's contents, so Ketta took another several steps into the room and let the door shut behind her, scanning the room for Ennec.

He didn't disappoint. In his out-of-place starched white shirt complemented by an almost painfully black vest, he stood out from the seedier crowd of the Twisted Fork like a zebra among raccoons. Ketta wondered for the hundredth time why he hadn't been assaulted, dressing like that and frequenting a place like this; she'd lived in the neighborhood for five years and it had only been the second half of that period that people seemed to have learned that she really did know how to keep drunken idiots, thirsty vampires, and miscellaneous muggers away from her and her possessions. As far as she knew, Ennec had no such skills.

Ketta slid up to the bar and caught a waitress's eye. "Zoe, right?" she asked, and after getting a confirmatory nod, she went on. "Get me a Mermaid's Tear. I'll be over there in the corner. I've got a tab running under the name Ketta Plesk." Having placed her order, she sidled over to Ennec and slid onto the stool beside him, giving him a smile when he looked up to see who it was but saying nothing yet.

Sometimes he could be coaxed into starting a conversation himself; this might or might not be one of those times.

Ennec was wearing a brooding expression, staring into his beverage as though it would help him answer some ineffable question. This wasn't out of the ordinary - he rarely started off an evening looking happy, although a pleasant night often saw him stroll home with a faint smile on his lips. On this particular evening, however, he seemed even more preoccupied than usual.

Ketta jostled her purse on the pretense of reaching to take the Mermaid's Tear Zoe handed to her. "How are you this evening, Ennec?"

"I'm all right. And you, Ketta?" he replied, absently fingering the curious amulet he always wore. It was a twisted lump of gold with a small red stone in the middle - too opaque to be a ruby, but whatever it was, it was pretty.

There. Now Mithnee has a name and a voice. Should be all she needs, Ketta thought to herself. "Oh, I can't complain," she laughed cheerfully. "Have you seen that new show about the werewolf who falls in love with the vampire heiress? What was the title again..."

"I don't recall. And no, I haven't seen it. Is it good?"

"My cousin Beth says it's cheesy but the action is good. I haven't seen it myself either." *Mithnee, what's taking you so long?* Ketta thought impatiently. She pushed her purse sideways with her elbow as she set down her drink, and felt acknowledging taps from the other side of the fabric.

As soon as Ketta registered this, there was a loud alarm from another part of the bar. Ennec leapt to his feet and shouted something that Ketta didn't catch, because at that moment, someone hit her at the base of her skull and she collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

Ketta woke up in the one place she least wanted to be. True, she'd never *been* in a consulate prison before, but she'd heard descriptions, and the gray, bare cell she occupied certainly matched them.

To her small relief, she was in a single cell, and not being forced to cohabit with someone else - yet. After she was tried (and undoubtedly convicted of about a dozen different charges) she would probably be in even less desirable accommodations.

She patted herself down. Her purse was gone, and her pocket pistol with it. They'd found the knife tied to her leg and some clever person had noticed that her hair fastener had sharp parts, but at least she hadn't been transferred into a prison outfit. That was either a sign that someone working for the consulate had qualms about undressing an unconscious girl, or that there was a reasonable chance of her being released, either of which could bode well.

Leaning against the wall, Ketta waited for something to happen. There was no one immediately visible in her cell block, and she had no tools with which to attempt escape, so there was nothing to do but wait for someone to drop by to feed her prison slop, or get her acquainted with a public defender, or some similarly unwelcome prospect.

As it turned out, she didn't have to wait long. One of those spine-chilling red and violet uniforms came stepping between the rows of cells not fifteen minutes after she had come to. Ketta scooted to a sitting position and peered through the bars.

"Ennec," she breathed.

"Ketta," he replied.

"You!" she snapped. "You're with the consulate. I can't believe I - for a year - I turned down five thousand suls from that pixie -"

"Ketta," he said calmly, a phantom of sadness passing behind his eyes before he blinked it away. "Please calm down. I need to ask you a few questions."

She winced. "Considering some of the rumors I've heard about how the consulate's people go about asking a few questions, that sounds more like a threat than anything, Ennec."

He looked off to his left and stared at the floor. "I'm not going to hurt you. But I need to know who you were going to get the pixie to charm, and for whom."

"Is she all right?" Ketta asked, feeling guilty about having gotten Mithnee involved in her stupid personal life.

"She's all right. The charm failed, so we're probably going to wind up having to release her for an arrest on an uncommitted offense even though she's been embezzling from the consulate for years. We know you were going to smuggle her out of the city, by the way, so you don't need to worry about keeping that a secret."

"I take it somebody had a charm detector in the bar and traced the charm to my purse. And thought that would be a good reason to put me out of commission," she said glumly. Ennec nodded, and Ketta looked at the wall. "She was going to charm you."

He took a step back. "Me?"

"Yes."

"For whom?"

Ketta made a valiant effort to stare a hole through the wall. "Me. Now let me out."

"I don't think I can do that now," he said, sounding surprised and - afraid? Ketta had never seen Ennec afraid. "Who are you working

for?"

"Look, I didn't know you were with the consulate, okay?" Ketta growled, whirling her head around to stare at him with smoldering eyes. "I don't work for anybody. It's not like I was getting a charm on you to get into the inner ranks of the system. It was a stupid thing to do, I regret it already, I should have just taken Mithnee's money and gotten her out of the city that very minute..."

"You didn't *know*?" he asked, taking a small step forward.

"You never told me!"

"Then why in the world were you getting me charmed?"

"Because I'm in love with you, you utter dolt!" Ketta screamed at him. "For almost a year and nothing was working and it was such a stupid thing to do and if only Mithnee hadn't come on a Sunday but there she was and sprites can do charms and I figured... I thought..." She broke off and began inspecting her nails.

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes, although Ketta huffed a little bit to catch her breath from the sudden outburst. She started picking at a bit of dry skin near a cuticle, and was trying diligently to be absorbed by this task when she heard the door to the cell swing open.

She looked up. Ennec was holding the door open and looking away from her expressionlessly. Ketta scrambled to her feet and out of the cell. "My things -"

"They'll be delivered to your apartment," he said in a monotone.

"All of them?"

"I'm afraid you may have to replace your unlicensed pocket pistol, and the pixie you had in your purse will not be rejoining you either,

but otherwise, yes," he answered.

"Are you going to get in trouble for this?" she asked softly, looking at the vacant cell.

"No."

"You must be pretty up in the ranks that you can release prisoners on your own recognizance," she said with a mirthless chuckle, steadying herself with a hand on the bars of another cell.

"You could say that," he said. "I'll show you out if you like. So if you run into someone they don't clap you back in a cell."

"Th-thank you," she stammered. "Ennec -"

He looked at her with that cool expression of his, and she decided against asking - whatever she had been going to ask. She wasn't sure what her plan had been, in hindsight. "Which way?" she whispered.

He set off in a direction and she followed mutely. She wished he would say something in response to her screamed confession. She was not sure what she wanted him to say, but some kind of acknowledgement would have been more comfortable than this silence. She wasn't quite sure that he'd heard her at all.

They were finally approaching a door marked "Exit" when another man in a consulate outfit turned a corner and saw them. Ketta wanted to bolt - she was edgy enough being around Ennec in one of those outfits - but Ennec kept walking, so she followed, trying to pretend that she wasn't bothered. To her surprise, the other consulate employee didn't bat an eye at her, but he snapped off a salute to Ennec. "Evening, Consul," he said as he passed.

Ketta boggled, almost tripping over her own feet. "You're the *Consul*?" she hissed, after the man had left earshot. "How can you *possibly*

be the Consul?"

"The senators hold an election -"

"I know that!" she cried. "You showed up in that uniform and I thought you were just a Chaser or a bureaucrat or something - you're the *Consul* . Holy crap."

"That's why I thought you were trying to charm me for... less than personal reasons," he said softly.

"Holy crap," she repeated.

They reached the exit. Ennec pushed the door open for her. She took a half-step towards it, then looked at Ennec.

"Ennec, there aren't very many things that can cause a charm to fail," she said.

"I know," he said. "There aren't very many things that can keep you from getting arrested when criminals routinely congregate at your office with a pack of Chasers following them, either."

Ketta blinked at him, and then, because there was nothing more to say, she kissed him.

"Ceet, I told you, I don't smuggle people away anymore," sighed Ketta.

"But you gotta help me, Miss Plesk! I swear I have no idea who stole the blood from the hospital, I can only feed off animals anyway, you *know* that -"

"Look, I might be able to do something for you, but not getting you out of the city. I'm retiring. I told you that."

"But Miss Plesk -"

"Sorry, Ceet. I *will* see what I can do, but I can't get you out of town." She hung up the phone over the vampire's protests and yawned. "Ennec, there's a Ceet Morul being chased for the hospital theft. I'm not saying he's innocent and I'm not saying he's guilty, but I'd have him checked for allergies to human blood before he gets put away," she murmured in his ear.

"Sounds like a sensible precaution," the consul replied. "When do you think people are going to stop phoning you asking for a ticket out of here?"

"Oh, who knows? Maybe never. I suspect someone will notice that the accuracy rate of consulate judges is going up, though. I'd anticipate a different sort of caller request in the near future."

He smiled at her - a more frequent sight in recent weeks. "It wasn't *that* bad, was it? The accuracy rate."

"Oh, you have no idea."

"The senators are still upset with me for pardoning the Oressy twins," he yawned. "They were *so* convinced it was them. I don't think they believed the story about the amphibious mermaid."

"They'll get over it. And even if they don't, what're they going to do? They can't have another election until you're dead."

"And I now have the world's best bodyguard to postpone that unhappy event."

"I won't be the best until you get me another pocket pistol, my dear," Ketta laughed, leaning over and planting a kiss on his forehead. "I'm a sniper type, I don't do hand-to-hand."

"You're irrepressible."

"You know it."

"Get a license and as far as I'm concerned you can have a military-issue rifle," he laughed.

"I think that might be a little too clunky to carry around," she said consideringly, and then laughed with him.