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Miracle

Gabrielle Sullivan

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Murray State University Honors College

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Certificate of Approval

Miracle

Gabrielle Sullivan
May 2021

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requirements of HON 437

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Department of English and Philosophy

Approved to fulfill the
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Miracle

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for the Murray State University Honors Diploma

Gabrielle Sullivan

May 2021

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Introduction

1. Introduction, Influences, and Intentions

I've always been a writer. Yes, that's a cliché, and I'm supposed to avoid those—but when I think back to my childhood, when I was four years old and playing with my toys, I was always making up stories. Stories nourished me; when I learned to read (after much urging from my kindergarten teacher) I inhaled books like they were air. I'd ask my mom every day to “tell me a story,” and I'd sit there and soak in her tales through my pores. When stories are your lifeblood, it's only natural for them to eventually bleed out of you as ink on a page.

The stories that have influenced me are not particularly intellectual. I'm not much of a realistic writer, as I've found my best stories come when I can take realistic problems that I understand and toss them through a fantasy or science fiction filter. This is certainly borne of my clearest influences: Rick Riordan's novels, for their combination of rich mythology and sharp, wry humor; *Harry Potter*, despite all its author's faults, for its willingness to pair a lighthearted world with a dark story; Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance Cycle*, for its earnest worldbuilding; Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief* and its unique, compelling point of view and stunning descriptions; Lauren Groff's short stories for their expansive timelines; and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* for its introspective, character-driven story. It would be remiss not to acknowledge influences outside of literature as well, like television and film. Largely, I think my grasp of dialogue and structure has been heavily shaped by consuming these media, which largely rely on dialogue for character development and plot advancement. Later in this introduction, I will delve into specific influences that television had on *Miracle*.

Pinning down my exact influences is difficult, but working out common themes of my stories is not. I like to consider what makes a family, how different people deal with the complicated nature of loss, and coming-of-age and the difficult self-discoveries that accompany

it. Engaging with one's past is a difficult endeavor, but I like writing characters who have to reckon with that, even if it's something I struggle with fully expressing. One of the reasons I like writing genre fiction so much is that I've found it easier to write about those challenging, personal subjects in another world than in our own. Of course, gaps can be bridged between the real and the fantastical (as seen in the different sections of *Miracle*), but I've found it more enjoyable, and more successful in terms of the end result, to write realistic struggles in a more unique, unexpected setting.

These trends in my writing are apparent in *Miracle*, which is set in a world adjacent but similar to our own, deals with loss and growing up, focuses on platonic intimacy and found family, wrestles with and eventually balances a difficult past with one's future, and explores real-life issues. My primary goals with *Miracle* show that science fiction can tackle serious, emotional issues. Since the majority of popular sci-fi is regarded as either being dominated by aliens and space lasers or absolutely lacking in emotion and overly technical, it's important for me to show that science fiction can carry the character-driven, emotional weight of other genres. *Miracle*, really, has very little plot. The archetypal Freytag's pyramid cannot work here, as the divide between exposition, conflict, and rising action is thin, and the climax is not the bombastic scene most science fiction works (literary and otherwise) have. *Miracle* is a quiet, firmly character-driven piece that I think offers readers as much literary complexity as a more traditional, realistic fiction piece. Additionally, I wanted *Miracle* to be more diverse than a lot of typical science fiction, which is frequently a white, straight, cis man's world. As one scholar describes it, "...(S)cience fiction, that same genre in which female readers for a long time had to identify with male characters because female characters were non-existent, or were relegated to traditional roles" (*Science Fiction Studies*). I wanted *Miracle* to be realistic in terms of gender,

race, and sexuality, and for it to reflect the diverse world we live in (which will, one may hope, grow only more accepting as time goes on).

Outside of my attempts to shift the perception of genre, I also wanted to write a coming-of-age story that didn't necessarily hinge on a romantic relationship. I, personally, have not had a life-changing romance, or even a romantic relationship that lasted longer than three months. However, I have had more than one deeply life-changing platonic relationship in my own "coming of age," and I think that, too often in literature, platonic intimacy is treated as an inferior subject to a character's romantic and/or sexual growth. I view (and wrote) the relationship between Mira and Jonas as the most important relationship within the novella; few events of the story would have occurred without the strength and importance of their entirely platonic relationship.

Another important intention of mine was to write a story that indirectly dealt with current cultural issues: notably, the dominance of Christian power in the United States and the lack of acknowledgement that climate change is real. Despite the United States being founded on the principles of separation of church and state, many politicians and lobbyists keep vying to increase Christian power, using their religious beliefs to take rights away from already fragile minorities. While we are not a theocracy, some politicians seem to aim for the United States to be based only on Christian principles, despite having many nonreligious, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and other religious citizens. Climate change is also a pressing problem, and yet few actions are being taken to fix it outside of half-hearted individual measures that cannot change the overall situation when the majority of emissions and waste come from unregulated industry. Climate change is a real threat, and no matter how interesting it would be to live in space stations, on the Moon, and on Mars, we only have one planet. While some of the experiences

Mira has on Earth are dramatized for plot, other facets are frighteningly accurate. Most science fiction pulls from issues of the world it was written in, and I wanted to go along with that trend.

My final intention for *Miracle* was to show the difficulty in reconciling a traumatic past with a future in which a person attempts to move on. So often, fiction attempting to deal with a complicated, unpleasant past ignores that not everything in even the most traumatic past can be bad. There are always highlights and the barest of good moments among the bad, and those moments can be hard to work with. Rejecting a traumatic past wholesale (as Hestia attempts to persuade Miracle to do) proves impossible for Mira, as she still deeply cares for her family and Jonas, and still has positive memories of her life in Canaan, even if all of them were laced with the weight of her trauma. Rather than only wallowing in her trauma or rejecting it wholesale, Mira attempts to balance them, which comprises the majority of her inner conflict in the story.

Overall, I think I achieved my goals in *Miracle*. While the piece overall could use some more fleshing out of certain parts (namely, more detail about the cult, potentially continuing past its current ending, and expanding Mira's relationships in the ending), I believe that my intentions for this story shine through and make for a compelling, interesting novella that I am proud of.

2. Structure

Miracle endured several major structural changes from its first inception a year-and-a-half ago to its current form. In one, Bex was the sole narrator, observing everything Mira did from a distance. In another, Mira recorded videos of herself talking about her past, rather than reliving her memories. In another (ill-advised) version, the entire story was told linearly, which

took out any dramatic tension. Landing on the current structure and style took several attempts, but I think it is the best option.

Miracle is separated into eight sections, and those sections move between three time frames: the “now” of her being stuck on the ship (and what may follow after—no spoilers!), the recent past of how she came to be alone and near death on the ship, and the distant past she’s been trying to repress. This structure was largely inspired not by any novel I read, but by individual episodes of two television shows I enjoyed in high school: “Out of Gas” from *Firefly* and “Fragments” from *Torchwood*. In “Out of Gas,” Mal, the captain of the spaceship *Serenity*, is willingly left behind by his crew when the ship seems irreparable. While alone (and, eventually, bleeding out after a run-in with scavengers) Mal remembers meeting his crew and purchasing *Serenity*. “Fragments” follows a similar structure: “Team Torchwood” is knocked out after an explosion on a mission, and each team member remembers the events of their life (usually traumatic) that caused them to join Torchwood. Each of these episodes follows a structure similar to what I used in *Miracle*, and breaking down the sections highlights how useful of a structure it is for a character-driven, backstory-heavy narrative.

The first (and chief, in terms of plot) section is the “now” section. This part, with little to no context, establishes a dire situation. The characters it focused on are stuck in a situation that the viewer cannot see a clear escape from, and if they do not get out of it, they will die. It’s the location of the chief conflict, and also has the narrative’s resolution. In *Miracle*, the “now” is the time frame for all of the interludes, plus the final “Miracle” section.

The second, typically shortest section is the lead-up to the now. This takes place directly before the “now” and usually has the inciting incident. It establishes tension and explains how the characters got into the danger of the “now.” Within both *Miracle* and *Fragments*, this

segment is much shorter; in *Miracle*, it isn't its own section, but is instead alluded to in narration within the interludes and at the end of "Hestia." Despite its shorter nature, it establishes a lot of tension, as the reader knows that something will go wrong, but they do not know when.

The final (and most important, in terms of narrative) section is the deep past. In this structure, the most important part of the story is what happened in the past, because it is a character-driven narrative. In "Out of Gas" and "Fragments," these episodes largely serve to establish backstory of main characters who haven't been given time in previous episodes; any questions a viewer may have on how Wash became the pilot or how Owen joined Torchwood despite seeming to hate it is explained in a sectioned-off, episodic story. Essentially, while the "now" sections establish the conflict, the past sections establish why a reader or viewer should care that the character(s) survive. The chief part of *Miracle* is establishing Miracle's past and how she got there—the character we are introduced to in the "now" sections is fleshed out and given weight behind her in the past sections.

Overall, this structure aids a character-driven narrative because it allows for equal treatment of deep backmoves to establish context and fast-paced, conflict-heavy "now" sections wherein the effects of character development can be tracked. Essentially, it's an elegant, less-cliché alternative to using dramatic flashbacks or overlaid, dialogue-based exposition. This worked well for *Miracle*, as I wanted the reader to see Mira stuck in a situation, and I wanted them to care about her not necessarily for the limited actions she takes when she's trapped in the ship, but by what she did before, what she's been through, and what she grew from. She is not just the woman encountered on the surface, but everything that changed her and that she changed about herself.

Separating the sections out did cause minor challenges with the novella—a few readers have noted that there is occasionally too much of a gap between the “now” instances, giving the past sections greater weight than the chief conflict, and the lengths of the past sections vary, as I came up with more important events in Mira’s life in certain time periods than in others. In later revisions, I may section the past sections into smaller, more insular parts and lengthen the parts on the ship so they bear more equal length in the narrative, like the screenwriter did in “Out of Gas.”

3. Science fiction, specific influences, and slim research that comes with “soft” sci-fi

In the science fiction genre, there are, really, two sub-genres: “soft” science fiction and “hard” science fiction. Hard sci-fi is more plot-driven and science-based, with the conflicts and the solutions to the conflicts having a strong grounding in science. *The Martian*, by Andy Weir, is a successful modern example of hard science fiction. Everything thrown at Mark, the main character, could reasonably happen in his situation, and he has to “science” his way through it. There is no deus ex machina or friendly robot to save him, and he’s not rescued through the “science” of wormholes and hyperspace. Mark only escapes Mars because both his and NASA’s science worked out. Soft science fiction, on the other hand, is more character-driven and allows for solutions that either ignore or bend science’s rules. It focuses more on the “soft” or social sciences, so it tends to take a closer look at societies and deal with psychology. The sub-genres still have overlap. Both of them deal with common societal issues in the era they were written in, transplanting and reforming issues into their chosen setting, and “a lot of science fiction operates on a spectrum between the two categories... Most often, sci-fi is liable to do a heavy serving of

one and perhaps a dash of the other” (Johnston), depending on the story and the expertise of the author.

Miracle is certainly heavier into soft sci-fi themes over hard sci-fi, largely because I’m far more of a social scientist than a technical scientist. However, its two chief influences come from opposite spectrums of the sub-genres: *The Martian* by Andy Weir, which, as mentioned earlier, is a prime example of hard sci-fi, and *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, which is a similarly strong example of soft sci-fi. *The Martian* inspired the basic concept of *Miracle*, of a person trapped in space with seemingly no chance of rescue, being saved at least partially by their knowledge of plants. Of course, I took that general concept and changed nearly all of it, but the inspiration is certainly still there. Weir expressed, both within the novel and in interviews, that his strategy for composing the plot was to create a problem, and then work out how Mark would solve the problem. My approach to *Miracle* mirrored that: what goes well for her, and then what ruins it? Mira’s life was a series of successes tempered by bad luck, an almost opposite to Mark’s journey in *The Martian* being a series of problems he fixes. I’m enamored by stories of a person near death and what that person will do to keep themselves alive, and what will they do when they realize their death is either inevitable or out of their control? Do they go with it peacefully, or do they fight it every step, or do they simply ignore it? Both *The Martian* and *Miracle* deal with this in ways I personally find interesting.

The Giver inspired more core aspects of the narrative; it was an entirely unconscious influence simply because it’s my favorite book and is almost always in the back of my mind. The similarities are there less in plot and more in theme: in *The Giver*, Jonas (an accidental name theft) was raised in what could be called a cult, where ideas outside the norm were punished. When he learned concepts beyond what he had been taught through receiving the Giver’s

memories, he changed and wanted more, just as Mira did when she read books in the abandoned mall. For both Jonas and Mira to experience a bigger life and (eventually) love the way they wanted to, they had to leave everything behind. A surface-level similarity is the transmission of memories, but a more fundamental correlation is the introspective qualities and “quietness” of the stories; the conflict of the Giver is deeply personal and introspective, and the climax is just as pensive. There was no big fight or deus ex machina sweeping in: it was Jonas, afraid, biking. *Miracle* follows in a similar vein.

Some influences went hand-in-hand with research I undertook. I’ve recently become interested in cults, and in restrictive religions that have cult-like aspects, like Mormonism and Orthodox Judaism. One episode of NBC’s *Dateline* titled “Unbreakable” followed a young woman named Rebecca Musser, who left her family’s isolated Mormon cult after she became the 19th wife of the cult’s 85-year-old leader, Rulon Jeffs. The episode piqued my interest in her, so I then read the memoir she wrote, *The Witness Wore Red*, and became more fascinated and horrified at what she endured and what she thought was normal. Not long after, I watched the Netflix series *Unorthodox*, based on the true story of a young Orthodox Jewish woman who leaves her insular society and joins normal society with varied success. The influences of these works can certainly be felt in *Miracle*, and they also served as quality research for me in order to properly represent my fictional religious cult that is nonetheless similar.

Outside of those types of media sources, other influences and research about religions and cults largely consisted of observing and cataloguing anecdotal experiences of formerly religious friends, the effects of heteronormativity on society and the minds of queer youth, and the effects of “purity culture” in American society. My research in these areas was intangible, as it was largely based on personal experiences of friends, acquaintances, and myself, along with

anecdotes expressed on social media websites like TikTok and Twitter. Social media, for all its flaws, is a place where cult escapees or people with religious trauma can find others with similar experiences and have a platform to tell their stories where people ignorant to their experiences can learn about them.

I did undertake some more traditional research, largely for some of the scientific aspects I wanted to include. I am terrible at gardening, so all of Mira's garden knowledge came from Google searches and some helpful pages about wild and easy-to-grow plants in Illinois. Studying the effects of hypoxia on the body proved interesting, especially as I, surprisingly, obtained most of the information from a website about Australian aviation. Some research took me down some intriguing rabbit holes, like discovering that not only are cicadas edible, but also there is a whole cookbook of cicada-based recipes. Learning the potential effects of unmitigated climate change was less fun, but, frankly, only made me more fervent about necessitating change. However, since I was writing soft science fiction, I didn't use all of these discoveries from some research for the sake of the story, like how artificial gravity is difficult if not impossible to establish in spaceships, and that terraforming the Moon or Mars would be similarly difficult or impossible. Additionally, I am certain that some of my statements on horticulture or oxygen deprivation are either misguided or entirely wrong, but this is soft science fiction—science simply has to be acknowledged, rather than followed to the last detail.

4. Conclusion

Miracle may be my proudest writing achievement. This story has been floating around in my head for over a year now, and I kept beginning to write it as a short story for a class submission before getting barely into it and realizing there was no way that Mira's story could be condensed into 20 pages and everything given its due. So, this story sat on the back burner while

I wrote other things, still growing and developing whenever I had a chance. Finally, it came time for my thesis, and I had an idea in my head: it would be 50 pages, maximum—easy to write, long but not too long, doable in the few months I had to write my thesis. Then I sat down to write it, and the first four sections crested 50 pages, and I somehow kept writing. It was far from easy, but finishing each section felt like reaching a trail marker in an endurance race: I grew closer, and anticipation rose, and the sense of accomplishment when I wrote the last sentence matched nothing else I have felt.

Besides a *very* strange rewrite of *The Odyssey* featuring a fourteen-year-old private school girl's knowledge of drugs and mob activity, *Miracle* is by far the longest work I have ever written. I call myself a novelist, but this is the first near-novel length piece I have finished, and I am *proud of it*. By virtue of my limited time I had to write it, there are some expansions I would like to have and some changes I would make should I revise this in the future. But, I feel no shame submitting *Miracle* as the culmination of my college career, all 100-something pages of it. I hope that any reader enjoys it, and I hope it makes them consider some new ideas about science fiction, the world, and what comes next.

Miracle

Gabby Sullivan

Prologue: Beginnings

The stars are full of sinners—that is what Miracle Beckett was taught. Not the stars, she learned eventually, but the small, twinkling dots that looked like stars if you didn't peer too close. The slow-blinking lights of the space stations still orbiting the earth, and all those beyond its orbit: the Venusian cloud cities, the Martian colonies, the far-shooting research ships, the stations orbiting other planets, other moons that, according to the Elders, God did not deem holy. She has learned that most of what she was taught was bullshit, but maybe the Elders were right about the sinner part. Maybe this is her fate because she's a sinner in the stars.

Her head aches, and her mouth is cotton, and, in a drifting spaceship breathing one of her last million breaths, she sits alone. *Abandoned. Ditched.* She kicks the chromium edge of her cot, forgetting that she is barefoot until the pain spikes. "Fuck!" She clutches her throbbing foot and tries to push back the tears burning in the corners of her eyes. "Fuck."

A light chime grates in her ears: **Are you in need of assistance, Beckett?**

Mira collapses on her cot, feeling the springs try to bounce her immediately off again, and shuts her eyes. Between her head, her foot, and her situation at large, all she wants to do is sleep until she dies. Or drink every ounce of booze in the ship. If Ronan even left any before the rest of the crew fled.

Beckett? Your vitals show that—

"Shut *up*, you *stupid* robot."

A beep, in the same too-chipper, chiming tone. **I am not a robot, and I have requested that—**

“I call you Bex. Sure. If I call you Bex, will you fix the fucking ship so I won’t die?”

Nothing, for a moment. Then: **The oxygenator is still non-functional, and the *St. Louis* has exactly 146 hours of oxygen left for one passenger.**

“Can I call the space police or something? Get a rescue?”

The ship’s communications are routed out of the chief lifepod, so communications are nonexistent.

Mira cracks her neck to fruitlessly remove some stiffness. *Fuck, Ko, you couldn’t have knocked me out where I would’ve laid comfortably?* “And how far to Andromeda?”

Exactly 163 hours at current rate of travel.

“That’s what I thought.” The throbbing in her foot is gone at least, and her headache *might* be beginning to ebb away. “Why couldn’t you be one of those robots with the grabby hands and toolkits.”

The BEX-2819 is a human-interest and ship management artificial intelligence, not a toolbot. I unfortunately have neither the limbs nor the programming to complete what you ask.

Mira looks at the six-inch screen across from her where a flickering, false image of “Bex” was displayed—a nondescript, ethnically-ambiguous woman in her mid-thirties with flat brown eyes and a plastic smile. “You can work shit out for how likely it is to happen, right?”

Yes, Beckett. I am programmed to be an expert at odds calculation.

“What are my odds of survival? Of making it to Andromeda?”

A short pause. **At your current rate of oxygen consumption, the current speed of the ship, and the current status of the oxygenator, 0.002 percent.**

“So I’m going to die?”

Silence. The screen blinks off with a tired buzz.

“Cool.”

There is no booze left. Mira isn’t surprised. Isn’t surprised about any of it, really. Not the oxygenator breaking, and not the crew ditching her for smoother waters. They weren’t bad people. Just strangers to her fleeing a ship like desperate rats.

The five of them—Ko, Ronan, Onyago, Volkov, and Gallagher—had traveled together for years before Mira joined them. Ko, the medic, had told her as much Mira’s first day on the ship, but she would’ve figured that out just from how they spoke to and acted around each other. Where Mira bumped into everyone in the cramped kitchen and even narrower hallways, they passed around each other blindly and easily. They didn’t speak to her much, mostly keeping to themselves. Gallagher, the captain, tried her best to be friendly, and Ko was genuinely nice, but Mira would be the first to admit she isn’t a charmer. Or even likeable, really. Ronan, the mechanic, didn’t help matters, either, as he was pricklier than Mira and had the advantage of familiarity with the rest of the crew. Plus, he decided to hate her as soon as she stepped on board.

“Casey was his partner, you see,” Ko explained when she’d let herself into Mira’s bunkroom that first night. “Our last botanist. They had a big ol’ fight, and that’s why Case left.” Ko patted Mira’s shoulder in a faux-sisterly manner and smiled thinly. “Ronan’s always a bastard, but he’s extra bastard right now. He’ll get better, I promise.”

He didn't, and Mira would bet every ounce of oxygen left in the ship now that he'd been the one to take the booze and, she discovered with a grim finality, the toolbox.

Fixing the oxygenator is out of her realm, anyway. Not when so much as a tablet gives her a headache. She could get down there with a wrench, sure, and fiddle around with a screw or two. But if Ronan couldn't fix it, there was no way Mira could. *Though it would've been nice to try*, she thinks.

Sitting on the floor beside the oxygenator, legs splayed into a wide V, she stares blankly at the one-foot-square gray box. It feels especially cruel that the thing killing her is so small and innocuous. Every ship has an oxygenator. Every ship breaks down, sometimes. That's why every ship has lifepods, ready to be launched with a programmed destination at the first sign of trouble. The *St. Louis* has two standard-issue lifepods, each able to seat and provide life support for five people.

Mira wasn't told that only one worked when she took the job. Or that she was the one of six who mattered the least.

She can't blame them. Really can't.

If only she could conjure the same acceptance that in 145 hours she is going to suffocate to death in a metal box of her own choosing, rather than under the gray sky and ever-browning grass she had always expected.

Hours pass. Mira lays curled on the hard couch in the common room and looks blankly out the wide window at the black expanse of space.

Beckett?

“Mmph.”

If you would like to, I have the capability to record farewell messages from you to send to loved ones.

“No.”

Bex gives an uncharacteristic *beep*. **You do not wish to record farewell messages?**

“Nope. Got no one to send it to.”

Another beep that sounds like confusion, and Mira wishes Bex would just deactivate.

Even without an address, I would be able to locate and send a farewell once communications are restored—

“I have *no one* to say goodbye to, you *stupid* robot!” Mira throws a pillow at Bex’s screen, wishing it was heavy enough to shatter the glass. “And I fucking know you’re not a robot. Just. Shut up.”

Everything cracks in her mind, and everyone flows out. Her parents. Caleb. Hestia. Jonas. *Hestia. Jonas. Canaan.*

I also have the ability to catalyze memories, to soothe your experience.

“No,” Mira says, petulantly, but she knows that it’s already begun. “I don’t want to think about them.”

And yet, she cannot help but remember.

Part One: Canaan

Miracle was the first child of her parents to live to their third birthday. Her mother had birthed four children before her, but every one had died—of illness, of injury, of malnutrition—until her. Mary, Mary, Joseph, and Louise (who had lived until she was two-and-a-half, so her mother had tentatively started to drop the baby moniker before a particularly bad summer caused her to die of heatstroke in her crib) were buried in the backyard of their winter house beside their father's five siblings and their great- and great-great grandparents, all buried underneath hand-carved scraps of wood. Most houses in New Canaan had a graveyard behind them, because death was something unavoidable when you lived on an Earth taking her last breaths.

“We are headed to salvation,” Father McCade would say at every service held in the ancient church. “We are the only ones.”

“We are the only ones,” the congregation repeated.

“From dust we were formed...”

“To dust we shall return.”

Those were the tenets of the Church of the Promised Land: Earth was their gift from God, and leaving it would be rejecting God's gift. Even though *not* leaving it ensured a difficult (and perhaps even deadly) life.

So, as the Earth died and the rich left, the believers stayed. Then the middle-class left, taking jobs on newly-built space stations or Martian colonies—to find new lives away from the graying, stinking, flooding Earth. They stayed. Then, finally, even the poorest left, taken by government programs and Red Cross ships. Still, they stayed, even as the Earth's population dwindled and summers blistered and rivers overflowed.

Mira grew up in New Canaan, the largest settlement of the Church of the Promised Land. Set up in what had been Illinois, she grew up by the flooded banks of the Mississippi River, with the half-collapsed Gateway Arch sticking out of the muddied water like snapped bones shadowing over her. She lived in a two-hundred-year-old house that her great-great-great grandparents owned and ran down to the river every day to collect dandelions and cattails not for childhood bouquets, but for salads and stews and medicines. She attended Sunday school beside the other twenty-or-so children who'd been lucky enough to survive alongside her and absorbed everything they told her about Jesus and Ruth and Revelation.

It was by no means an idyllic world, but Mira was happy. She liked the rush of joy she felt when Father McCade complimented her singing or when she found a hidden patch of chicory for her mother's morning drink. When she was young, she blushed red and basked in it when she heard the ladies gossip about the relationship sure to blossom between her and her best friend, Jonas, even as it baffled her. There was not an ounce of doubt in Mira's head that *this* was the life she was to live—that God had decided she should be saved, and she just had to put in a little work to earn that salvation.

She wasn't a fool; she knew about the people in space. She just thought that they did not matter—or that if they did, they only mattered as people who did not feel God's love, who were not God's chosen.

The first Caravan she remembered came when she was eight. They rolled up in a sleek vehicle, shining silver and floating two feet off the ground. It hummed quietly, and the back of it was stacked with boxes of supplies that New Canaan's Elders would accept with some chagrin. "God's gifts come in many forms," Father McCade would say. "And sometimes they come from those you least expect."

The Caravan came annually at the beginning of winter, bearing medicines, shelf-stable food, eyeglasses, and a ticket off Earth, which hardly anyone took. This didn't stop the Caravan leaders from trying, as they'd talk to anyone who would listen about the "quality of life" above the atmosphere. As she grew older, Mira grouped the Caravan folk into three categories: the Unboxers, the Friendlies, and the Presenter. The Unboxers—usually three muscled people gawking around the settlement like they'd never seen anything like it—would help the Canaanite volunteers unpack the crates of their goods. The Friendlies would wander around, talking to whoever caught their eye—usually someone standing in the back, trying their best to bring down hellfire with their eyes, or the youngest children. They'd squat to the child's eye level and pass them a stuffed toy and chat with them until the parents swooped in and took them away, leaving the toy to fall to the dirt.

"They're the bad ones," Mira's father, Abraham, reminded her every year. "They act like they understand you, but they just want to take you away."

"From you?"

"From everything."

There was only one Presenter—usually middle-aged, casually dressed. Approachable in the basest sense, with an easy smile and an air of confidence that Mira only usually saw in Father McCade. She—because the Presenter was usually a woman—would stand at the back of the Caravan's floating vehicle holding a silvery device that displayed an opaque hologram. And—despite everything, despite her mother grasping her shoulder as if to never release her, despite Father McCade and her grandfather and the Elders beginning to lead a droning prayer to drown out the presenter, Mira was *fascinated*.

The holograms were like looking into a distorted mirror: the utterly alien mixed with the familiar. There were children raising their hands in school; but they sat before a screen lit with brightly-colored math equations instead of a blackboard so covered in chalk dust it was nearly white. There were people in a field farming and bent over; but the sky behind them was orange, not blue, and the faint outline of a dome was visible miles above. There was *church*, of all things, and Mira heard gasps as the crucifix appeared (and later heard her father and grandfather have a quiet, intense conversation about it); but their church was clean and white, and the priest wore finer robes than Father McCade's worn vestments could compete with. There were pictures of families playing, but the children looked chubby and happy, grinning with children who looked just like them. *Siblings*, Mira thought. *Siblings I could play with.*

Mira cast a glance at her mother's rounded stomach and then looked up to see her face twisted, stricken. "We need to check on the chickens, Miracle." She grabbed Mira's upper arm and dragged her from the scene, from the glimmering holograms that had nestled in Mira's mind.

That child was lost before it was even born, with her mother having a late-term miscarriage that left her silent and curled up in bed. She refused to remove her blood-covered clothes for two days until Mira's father dragged her to the river to wash. Mira helped her father bury the fetus—a boy, small enough to fit in her father's palm—in their backyard, and Father McCade came alone to murmur prayers over the dirt.

She tugged at her father's worn shirtsleeve as Father McCade walked away. "Am I ever gonna get a sibling, Daddy?"

She heard the slap before she felt it; a sharp sound that rang in her ears and pricked tears in her eyes. Before she could cry out or let the tears fall, she felt her father's arms around her, warm and shocking.

"I'm sorry, baby." His voice was choked.

Weird, she thought. *Ow*.

"We want you to have a sibling real bad," he said. "It's just not in the plan right now."

"Why not?" she wriggled her way out of her father's vice grip. *Too tight*. "Jesus had a brother. Why don't I get one?"

"Because—" her father growled out a sigh. "Because it's God's will. And what happens is up to him."

"That's stupid."

His weathered face seemed to crack with an emotion Mira hadn't ever registered on him—something twisting and awful—before shaping back into what she was used to: her father, equal parts staunch and devoted, and near impossible to pin down.

He hadn't slapped her before. She wasn't sure how to feel about that, either.

"What God wills will happen. Everything will come out right in the end. We just gotta pray, all right?" He stood up from where he knelt and scraped dirt off his knees. His gaze hardened, and Mira braced for another slap—though why, she did not know. Instead, he grasped her shoulder just on the edge of too tight. "Don't ask me or your mother about a sibling again. Especially not your mother. Do you understand me, Miracle?"

"Yes!" she said. "Sorry, Daddy."

"C'mon." He let go of her shoulder and pulled the shovel from the dirt. "Let's get your momma some food in her."

The old church wasn't fancy, but it was the loveliest place Mira knew existed. Meticulously maintained stained glass covered each of the windows, but for the ones in the far back of the Church, which had been removed years before she was born to allow airflow in the summer and to block with quilts in the winter. The pews were made of light wood, long worn soft as balsa by generations of bottoms in the seats and marked with initials from bored children. The air in the vestibule lingered with the scent of incense from services throughout the week, and her steps on the pocked stone floor echoed musically—a lovelier tone, she thought, than any of the church ladies who led worship.

The church was never closed, and one or two Canaanites could be found praying in front of the altar at any time. Mira, when she would go, would sometimes join them, but she preferred to hide in the back, hidden in the small hallway that led to where the Sacrament was kept, until they would leave. Then she'd wander around the church, all alone. Sliding on the pews was a fun activity, as was mimicking the long, drawn faces of the saints, Jesus, and Mary on the stained glass windows and the paint-chipped statues. When she was younger, she'd curl up atop a pew and take a brief nap in the still, spicy air and wake to someone having covered her up with an altar cloth. Sometimes, she'd kneel down and pray, but more often than not if she talked to God she would tell him about her day—complaining about the boys at school, or her parents being strict, or her family not getting the best supplies from the Caravan. Never aloud—speaking aloud, she knew, would shatter the quiet that she went to the church for.

She was always drawn to quiet.

Mira was ten when her grandfather first pulled her from the house, hoe in hand, and showed her how to plant.

“Your father’s clueless, you know that? Man can take care of any chicken you give him, but kills every plant in his reach,” Grandpa said. He knelt in the soft soil he’d turned up twenty yards from their home and thumbed at a dry stalk that might have been soybeans. When she didn’t respond, he said, “Good move not saying anything, kiddo. You shouldn’t. Glad you aren’t in the mind to disrespect your dad.”

Mira shook her head. Her father hadn’t hit her since that ill-advised moment two years ago, but she still remembered the sting whenever she thought about smarting back. “Father McCade said we need to be respectful, like Jesus.”

Grandpa pulled the plant from the ground and tossed it to the side. “He’s right. Now get down here and pull these dead things up.”

Mira sat cross-legged a few feet away and wrapped her hand around the biggest browned plant. She tugged lightly and was pleasantly surprised when it came up, roots and all, with little resistance. She reached one curious finger into the hole it left behind; while the earth she sat on was sunbaked and warm, the dirt in the hole was cool and crumbly. She hoisted the plant up for her grandfather to inspect and beamed.

Grandpa smiled and tugged the end of her long brown braid. “Good job, kiddo. You wanna learn how to plant?”

“Yes,” she said. She’d always liked watching the plants grow—not the ones by her house, as they never quite thrived, but she’d go to the big fields in the good summers when the corn would fruit just to see how much it would grow every day. She even went to the riverbank,

sometimes, to throw river-water on the sprouting cattails and dandelions in mimicry of the people she saw in the fields. “I like plants more than chickens.”

“Why’s that?”

“Plants don’t bite.” Mira held up her pointer finger, where one of the chickens (Effie, who had always been disagreeable) had bit her yesterday, leaving the faintest red mark.

Grandpa took her hand and tutted over it. “What a shame. I’ve got some good news, though.”

“What?”

“We can have chicken for your birthday dinner.”

Mira furrowed her brow and nodded. “Good.” Her stomach panged with hunger just at the idea of eating chicken meat—pan fried in sunflower oil with dandelion greens, or roasted in their wood-oven so the thigh meat fell off the bone. She could sop up the chicken fat with a piece of bread until it was dripping. Maybe they could even get some basil from Mrs. Anderson, who always grew some in the windowsill of her summerhouse.

Meat was a rare thing. Hunting for rabbits and squirrels was easy enough, but any other game had wisened up years ago that they should avoid the woods around New Canaan or get a bullet in their gut. Non-game meat was even rarer; only when an animal was near death anyway, or they felt the beast was beginning to be less useful. With Henrietta (a much more pleasant chicken) having hatched some chicks recently, her grandfather’s assertion of chicken for her birthday was a pleasant, but not unexpected suggestion.

“Do you think we could grow some green beans in time?” Mira asked.

Her grandfather laughed. “Maybe, if we get planting.” He palmed her a handful of seeds, warm from his rough-skinned hand. “Now let me tell you what your dad can’t get in his thick skull.”

It was that sunny afternoon—a lucky one, in mid-April, in those few days before the summer started roaring in blistering hot and the winter stopped leaving the world covered in a fuzz of frost every morning—when Mira first learned to love the feeling of dirt under her nails.

She mothered those green beans. Every day she’d go out in the early morning before trekking to school and mind them—pulling weeds, checking if they needed water, ensuring the dirt was undisturbed. She kept a keen eye for the first bright green leaves to sprout, and when she found them, she ran to show her parents and her grandfather, and Grandpa grinned himself and said, “You could make those plants grow with just that grin, kiddo.”

Pride was a sin, she’d always been taught. But it felt less like one when she knelt over those slowly-sprouting green beans.

Two weeks later came a heat wave. A bad one—a deadly one, if Canaan wasn’t careful, but something they were used to. 105 degrees in the shade and no rain for a month. The river grew shallow, and water had to be saved for drinking. So the corn and the beans and everything in the fields shriveled, and no matter how much water Mira saved in her glasses to water her green beans, they shriveled, too. When the rains came back, Mira sat in the growing mud and cupped her shriveled plants in her hands until her grandfather came out to scoop her up.

“What did I do wrong?” Mira said into her grandfather’s sodden shoulder. *Was it my pride?*

“Nothing, kiddo. Sometimes God sends a storm, is all.”

And with the dried-up stalks clutched in her hand and her belly already aching from hunger, Mira grew angry at God for the first time.

Mira was thirteen when her baby brother was born and she decided she'd never have children.

Joseph Caleb was a hesitant victory. Her mother had lost sixteen children by the time this son was born: six resulted in miscarriages, leaving her covered in blood, despondent and unmoving on her bed. Three of those six were late enough that she had to labor through it only to be rewarded with an unbreathing, translucent fetus the size of her hand. For one of them, Mira was eleven and deemed old enough that when the midwife—a kind, red-faced woman named Mary Ellen—pulled her into the room to comfort her mother, she couldn't say no without upsetting her further. So she stood beside her bed and felt her mother's hand go from tight and straining to limp and defeated when the labor was done and there was no squalling child between her bloodied thighs.

Then there were her children who died sometime after they were born—the children Joseph Caleb might join the ranks of. The four before Mira was born, and the four after. Mira had more funerals than birthdays for her little siblings, who all died so young she could hardly garner emotion when it happened.

Joseph Caleb was born a mere year after a miscarriage so difficult that Mira's mother didn't move from bed for nearly a month. It made it especially a blessing that his birth was the easiest she'd ever had. Mira, pressured again into the birth room by the midwife, held her mother's hand and tried to not be sick when his wrinkled, red body slid out of her in a gush of pink-tinged fluid. He was a fat child from that first look at him, and his lungs opened into a

bellowing wail without so much as a slap on the bottom from the midwife. He was disgusting, and Mira loved him immediately.

Her father scooped him off the bed and wiped him with a towel before transferring him to her mother's bare chest, and Mira just gazed at his tiny fist as it grasped onto nothing. Her parents cried, and the midwife snipped off his umbilical cord, and Mira just stood there, unsure what to do.

"Placenta's coming," her mother said, suddenly. Her father took the baby off her chest and, to her shock, held him out to Mira.

"Hold him?" he asked, without even looking at her.

Miracle took the baby. He was hot and slightly sticky, and he didn't seem to weigh enough. His mouth opened and shut, already searching for a nipple his mother wasn't ready for yet. Impulsively, Mira stuck her pointer finger in his mouth, and he sucked. His screwed-shut eyes opened to reveal foggy grey-blue irises. "Sorry, kiddo," she said. "Haven't got milk." He released her finger with a high, sighing breath.

Joseph Caleb slept in a bassinet in her mother's room. It was summer, so they were in the summer house—a massive, airy house with frequently-patched screened windows left open constantly to bring even the barest whisper of a breeze in the awful heat. With its huge corridors and rooms, it was easy enough for Mira to compulsively sneak into her mother's room a few times each night just to ensure her brother still breathed. She would wash a rag in the coolest, shadiest water she could find and drip some lightly on his sleeping forehead to cool him. Sometimes he'd wake up, and once he got a little older, he'd smile and coo at her and Mira would run out of the room before those coos turned into crying. But on those hot nights, waking herself up with the fear he'd be red and hot and *too cold* when she'd check on him, Mira knew

she'd never have children. She cradled him like she'd cradled her dead green bean sprouts three years ago; like she cradled the squash she'd managed to grow this past summer, orange and heavy with seeds.

“You're gonna live, okay?” she murmured to him, the first night the summer heat broke as they approached their too-brief fall. “God's gonna will it, and you're gonna make it.” Sitting beside the bassinet, Mira finally understood why her mother sometimes sat and stared blankly at a wall when she heard a baby cry.

As Joseph Caleb grew, she tamped down every ounce of pride that she had for him so God wouldn't take him from her like he'd taken her plants.

When the Caravan came that winter, Miracle went without her parents. Caleb (which she had been hesitatingly, preemptively calling him when they were alone in hopes that he'd live long enough to drop the baby name) had been sneezing for the last two days—nothing that worried Mira, but enough that her parents stayed home to fuss over him. So she went to see the spectacle with no one but her best friend Jonas, who technically wasn't supposed to be there. His father, Simon, was a strict man who hated the Caravan. He was in the running to become an Elder when one of the current ones passed away, and Mira was sure he'd campaign to not take anything the Caravan gave. But Jonas was as curious as any fourteen-year-old, so he promised his parents that he and Mira were just going down to the river and joined her to watch the Unboxers load box after cardboard box out of their hovering vehicle.

“How do you think that works?” Jonas gestured at the shiny metal thing floating thirty feet from them.

“Maybe there’s ghosts holding it up,” Mira said. “And they’ll jump out and spook you if you get too close.”

Jonas rolled his eyes. “No, but seriously! They’ve got all this wild tech, and we’ve got, what? Lanterns? Mr. Simmons’ truck, on a good day?”

“Nothing,” Mira said. She looked at the glimmering hologram the Presenter held, showing vehicles even nicer than the one in front of them zipping around in a brightly-lit city. “Do you think there’s people in all of those?”

“Most of ‘em. Some drive on their own.” The voice came from behind them; unfamiliar, but smooth and youthful. Jonas and Mira turned to see a woman in her late twenties, with light brown skin and black hair shaved into a buzzcut. *A Friendly*, Mira thought. *What happened to her hair?*

“They drive without a person?” Jonas asked. “*How.*”

The woman laughed and held up her hands in surrender. “Wish I could tell you, but all I know is how fast one delivers my takeout.” When the two looked at her blankly, she laughed. “Sorry. There are places called restaurants, and they make food for you, and you eat it there or get it *takeout*—you take it home to eat.”

“Right,” Mira said, though the concept of it was baffling. She’d read about restaurants in books in the abandoned mall, but she’d filed them away as another fake thing—like unicorns, college, and television. The idea of that much food being in one place was incomprehensible and intoxicating.

“You have... me-noos?” Jonas asked, pulling the word from one of the books Mira’d read to him.

“Men-*vous*. Don’t worry, it’s an annoying word to pronounce.” The Friendly sat on the ground, criss-cross, and gestured towards them. “Sit down. We can talk for a bit.”

Jonas and Mira met eyes. *We’re not supposed to do this*, she thought.

“I won’t bite. Or kidnap you, if that’s what you’ve been told.” Her eyes were round and cool grey, like a cloud—soft and welcoming. Mira wondered, aimlessly, if she’d fall through them like she’d fall through a cloud. Maybe they’d worked out how to sleep on clouds in space. *I want to know so much*.

“Then what are you gonna do?” Mira asked.

The Friendly’s smile widened. “Tell you about a better place.”

The woman’s name was Ruth. She was, bafflingly, a Christian; and though Mira knew she didn’t align with the proper creed, she felt comforted all the same when she prayed a Hail Mary with them (at Mira’s urging to prove she didn’t lie) and the words were the same. She’d grown up on a space station, where her mother worked in “marketing,” which involved selling things, apparently, and her father was a teacher. She’d gone to school like them, but she’d had experiences they didn’t: school dances, and Halloween, and other things that sounded like something out of a book (some things she *had* encountered in a book and filed away as fiction).

Ruth wasn’t married. That was most startling. Near thirty, and unmarried with no children.

“Who do you live with, then?” Jonas asked. “Your parents, still?”

“On my own,” Ruth said. “I have a little apartment—it’s like a small house in a bigger building. Just me and my dog.” She made a few strokes across her palm until a hologram of a tiny animal popped up—light brown, floppy-eared, and ridiculously fluffy, its pink tongue stuck out in the approximation of a grin.

“That’s a dog?” It looked nothing like the wire-haired, suck-bellied things that ran around Canaan, stealing bones and scraps from the garbage and terrorizing the chickens.

Ruth nodded. “Her name’s Posy. She’s a devil.” She swiped the hologram away and folded her hands together. “But yeah. You don’t need to be married or live with anyone. I have my friends, and we do things together, but we live separately. I don’t even live on the same station as my parents do—they live on *U.S.-C* and I live on *Andromeda*, though I think I’ll move to the Moon soon.”

“So you can just... live wherever you want,” Jonas said.

“Do whatever you want, too—within reason, of course.” She smiled, but gentler, and her eyes gleamed wide and open. “What do you guys want to do that you think you can’t?”

Mira’s braids suddenly felt heavy on her back. *I want to cut my hair like yours.*

“Can boys be—” Jonas started, but stopped when he noticed the silence that had fallen in the usually loud field.

Crowds gathered at the Caravan, much to the chagrin of the traditionalist members of Canaan. Some just liked to watch what the Unboxers unboxed, so they could properly lay claim on it later. Others (especially children) gazed in awe and confusion at the strange technology and the strange people. Those who hated the Caravan even gathered to pray loudly that they would repent from their sinful lives—or, at least, go away. Crowds always gathered; dispersed, sectioned-off crowds, but crowds all the same.

Two people passed between the repenters and the watchers, bearing cloth bags and tied-together suitcases on their backs. A man and a woman, in their late teens, who had clearly not fared well the past year. The man’s face was gaunt, even through his beard, and the woman

limped with each step she took. Yet, stragglers in between the crowds moved to one side or the other as they strode through, confident even under their heavy bags.

Not two people—three. The woman held an infant in a sling against her bony chest, whose mewling sounds emanated across the field, splitting the heavy silence.

“That’s Corrine Andrews,” Jonas whispered. “Mom helped deliver the kid three months ago. Said she wouldn’t stop crying the whole time.”

They approached the Caravan’s vehicle and set their bags down on the grass with soft thuds. The Presenter stepped off her platform and shook the man’s hand.

“Do you want to join us?” the Presenter said. She spoke louder than was necessary; Mira wasn’t sure if she was just used to speaking that loudly, or if she really wanted everyone to hear.

The man just nodded, and the woman—Corrine—latched onto his arm.

“Then take their things,” she said to the Unboxers, who immediately hoisted up the worn luggage and placed it carefully on the back of the Caravan’s vehicle. “We welcome you.” She gestured towards the vehicle with a wide arm, and the Andrewses were helped into the interior of the vehicle by a waiting Friendly. The Presenter looked out at the crowd. “We welcome *all* of you.”

The shouts came, then, roiling like a swarm of cicadas.

Heathens! Killers! Thieves! some shouted, while others called out *Fools! Abandoning your God!* It all merged into nothing but an angry buzz, with occasional peals and wails cutting through the din. Still others simply knelt on the ground where they stood and began to quietly pray. Father McCade knelt amongst them, doing nothing to stop the yelling.

“I think this is my cue,” Ruth said. Her eyes darted between the Caravan and the teenagers before her. “Think about leaving. When you’re older. There’s *so* much more than this.”

Then she turned around and dashed to the Caravan, leaping onto the cargo-laden back as the now-surrounded vehicle floated higher and higher out of the din.

As the vehicle zoomed out of the field, Mira saw Corrine Andrews' face pressed, smiling, against the window.

Interlude: Catalysis

Miracle rockets off the couch towards the trash can, where she promptly, painfully vomits. Her head pounds and her stomach burns, and she swishes her tongue around before spitting out as much leftover bile as she can. “What the *fuck* was that, Bex?”

As I stated before, comes Bex’s smooth voice, **I can catalyze your memories through your mind-link so you may relive some of your past before your imminent death.**

Mira barks a laugh. “Bold of you to assume I *want* to relive *anything* from my past.” She rests her head on the blissfully cool countertop, shutting her eyes. *Canaan. Father McCade. Cicadas, buzzing.* She opens her eyes. “It’s still happening. I’m still seeing shit.”

Once your hippocampus and amygdala have been catalyzed, the process will take time to fully complete.

“Great. So I’m just stuck in memory land for the foreseeable future?”

Not necessarily. Bex’s voice sounds closer, and Mira turns her head to the side to look at the screen embedded in the refrigerator. To Bex’s credit, her digital face does look mildly concerned at Mira’s reaction. **To have a fully immersive memory experience again, I would have to further catalyze. I pulled you out of the memory, as your blood pressure had dropped significantly.**

“Probably the lack of oxygen.”

You still have 136 hours before the CO2 levels in the *St. Louis* become deadly.

“Thanks for the countdown.” The first whiffs of vomit reach Mira’s nose, and she grimaces. “Open trash chute 3.” She ties up the bag and throws it down the hole, admiring, for a moment, the hiss the chute makes as the metal lid slid over it. Caleb liked making hissing sounds like that when he pretended to be a snake in the grass—

Stop. She digs her nails into her palm, relishing in the distraction of the dull pain. “I’m going to the greenhouse. Please leave me alone until I die.”

Bex, unspeaking, opens the doors between the common room and the greenhouse.

The greenhouse is the best part of the *St. Louis*. She hasn’t been on many long-travel spaceships—just the Caravan’s craft, when she first left Earth—but she was surprised at the quality of the garden when she first stepped on. It is a small room, like every room on the ship, but stepping into it makes Mira, for a moment, feel like she isn’t that far from Earth. The sheet metal walls are thickly hung with vines, backed up by a thin layer of soft green moss that covers every bare surface. Narrow tables are piled with growing things in pots—tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, blackberries, raspberries, and strawberries, and pots full of flowers that Mira only recognizes from the flower shops on the Moon: tulips, daffodils, and zinnias, all blooming bright petals among the green. The floor is her favorite: a thick carpet of grass, dotted here-and-there by dandelions she was, technically, supposed to pluck.

Whoever Casey was and whatever they did to make Ronan a piece of shit, they at least knew how to grow plants. Even if they planted fucking *mint*, the idiot. For the last three months, Miracle has had comparatively little to do. Pull weeds when they interfere with the plants, water whenever necessary, pick produce when it ripened, remove as much goddamn mint as she could before it overwhelmed everything... It was an easy job, and one she wasn’t entirely sure was necessary. It didn’t take long for Mira to realize that the only reason she was even hired was because none of the *St. Louis*’s crew had any idea how plants worked. Gallagher, the captain, admitted as much. “We’re all station-born, kid, and none of us were rich enough to have a yard.” They thought Mira’d been a farmworker on the Moon; a half-truth that she was used to telling.

The tomatoes are ripe, so Mira pulls one straight off the vine and takes a bite. She almost moans at the fresh sweetness of it, and shuts her eyes as the flavor flushes away the remaining bile taste in her mouth. She tears out a few more stray mint plants hidden among the tomato plants' roots with her left hand and eats the tomato to the stem with her right, not minding the juice running down her forearm.

Wonder if Jonas likes tomatoes, she thinks. It was a crop that never flourished in Canaan, it being more of a fickle plant. She'd had her first tomato in canned, sauced form on the Caravan's ship, and the combination of garlic and the sharp-sweet from the tomato over the long noodles almost made her tear up. Caleb would probably like it, though he'd insist on grabbing the noodles with his hands and get all messy—

“Stop it,” she says. Her voice seems overloud in the greenhouse. The ship is so quiet now, without the clanking of the oxygenator processing and the constant low conversation between the rest of the crew. She's always liked quiet, and always found it lacking on the Moon with all its people and its bustle, but this quiet is crushing.

She digs her thumb into the dirt to bury the tomato stem; it'll be some extra fertilizer when it decomposes. She stops. *No, it won't,* she thinks. *Plants need oxygen to survive.* She buries it anyway, having nowhere else to put it, and sinks with her back against the wall. She kicks off her shoes and wraps her toes in the grass.

Her stomach hurts. She tries to rationalize that it's leftover from her vomiting earlier, or from downing an acidic tomato too quickly, but she knows it's not the case. Her eyes grow hot with tears, and sobs choke out her. Her hands rip up grass, and she aimlessly wonders if the tears will help or harm the soil.

Are you all right, Beckett?

“I’m just—I’m never gonna see him again. I just miss him so much and he’s not even gonna know I’m dead.” She wipes her nose with the edge of her shirt, but it does nothing but smear snot more. She feels foolish and young, sitting barefoot in the grass with snot smeared on her face and tears still pouring, but all she can think of is that she no longer remembers his voice after it deepened, or what his smile looked like under his patchy beard. “It’s killing me.”

Bex lets out a few mournful beeps. **Would you like to remember him? Jonas Prior, I presume? I will try to not make it painful.**

“Please.”

Everything fades away—the pain in her stomach, the dirt under her feet, Bex’s robotic voice, and Mira remembers.

Part Two: Jonas

They were supposed to fall in love. If not fall in love, they were supposed to get married young, live together, and try to have children even if they hated each other. It was a fate foisted upon them by their parents from the time they were five and ran around catching worms, and by the rest of Canaan by the time they were eight. It was a joke to Miracle and Jonas rather than an inevitability, because nothing feels inevitable when you are young. They were best friends, and staying best friends was the only inevitability they considered.

They were fourteen the first time they explored the abandoned mall. It wasn't far away—maybe a 45-minute walk from New Canaan's center, visible on a clear day, but they were technically forbidden to go there. Simon, Jonas's father, said the structure was unstable, and Mira's mother said it was too far away. But when Mira's parents were distracted by year-old Caleb and Jonas's parents were busy arguing, the duo slipped out of town unnoticed in the early summer morning.

It was sweltering already, and the noisily-buzzing cicadas were so active that Mira occasionally had to pull Jonas out of the way of one he couldn't quite see launching towards his face. Jonas's eyesight had only worsened with age, and each pair of eyeglasses the Caravan brought gave him a splitting headache, so he avoided wearing them whenever possible.

"Didn't know I needed protective goggles for cicadas," Jonas said after Mira tugged him out of the way of a particularly large bug.

Mira barely heard him. Her bones thrummed with energy like she was a plant greening under the sun. "What'cha think's gonna be in there?"

Jonas hummed noncommittally. "Probably a bunch of plants."

“Pause,” she ordered, and Jonas stopped, well-used to this. Mira stretched out her arms and ran forward until she grew short of breath, relishing the soft slap of the tall grasses on her bare arms and the angry *whirrs* of cicadas as they trundled away. “All clear!” she shouted, and Jonas followed her at his own pace, shaking his head and grinning.

“One day, a whole swarm of cicadas is gonna seek revenge on you, Mir.”

“And when they do,” Mira said, walking backwards, “I’ll catch ‘em and make us some dinner.”

While cicadas were a nuisance for the people and animals and an all-out horror for whatever crops they managed to coax out of the earth that summer, they were a rare consistent source of easily-obtained protein that, when cooked right, didn’t taste half bad. Parents made a game out of it for their children, sending them out with homespun nets in the early morning to catch them when they were still soft-shelled and green and groggy. The energy that sent her running across the field was in part a product of her stomach being full of a breakfast of grains and boiled, buttered cicadas.

“Like you can cook,” Jonas said.

Mira crossed her arms. “Better than you.”

They approached the shell of the mall, stepping out of the field and onto the cracked, battered black rocks leading to the low, massive building. Weeds and grasses grew thickly among the rocks, but lacked the unchoked, lithe height of the wild grasses they’d run through. Cicada corpses littered the now-visible ground, and Mira felt an unwanted pang in her stomach knowing that food source would soon abandon them.

The dingy brick of the mall nearly blended in with the grayed-out sky. There were no markers left on the building, though the duo skirted around giant letters fallen and rusting on the

weed-covered ground. There were many entrances, so they picked one at random. Over the years, they'd make their way through all of them except for one to the second floor, where the stairs had long rusted into a pile on the ground below.

It was by far the largest building either of them had been in. Even their summer houses—sprawling, abandoned mansions chosen for the number of windows to open to circulate air through—couldn't compare to the sheer *hugeness* of it. Or, Mira soon realized, the emptiness. No animals took up residence in the mall, as the few plants that attempted to root themselves in the cracked tile failed to thrive, leaving the fragile corpses of ivy crawled web-like up the plaster walls. No bustle of the village, as they were far enough away that not a sound reached their ears. Only the fronts of nameless stores gaping wide in an unbroken line, dotted by collapsed, moldering furniture and a dank, mossy pool of stagnant water directly under the busted glass ceiling. The only sounds were the ones made by Mira and Jonas, feeling with each step like trespassers at a graveyard.

Most of the stores were empty, leaving only bare counters and waterlogged decorations on the walls—faded whimsical decals, geometric shapes, and even men and women in their undergarments, barely-clothed crotches and breasts nearly pouring out of their clothing.

“Father McCade *cannot* know we came here,” Jonas said. His brown skin was deeply flushed, and Mira knew from the burning on her skin (and the unfamiliar tingle in her stomach) that she must look similar.

“Let's go on, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Mira imagined the people packing everything into careful boxes, just like the Caravan. Clothes and food and toys and whatever other wonders had been here, all packed perfectly into

the smooth brown cardboard and sold to people. Mira still wasn't sure what, exactly, selling was, nor was she sure of the function of a mall or a store. She only knew the names of these places from the warnings given to them—don't go to the mall, don't go to the stores. Really, her parents did not know either; they were told the same things by their parents, who were told by their parents.

Some of the stores in the mall were covered by a thick metal grate, but most of them had at least one corroded corner from the rivers of water that laid stagnant on the slightly sunken floor. Those particular stores, for reasons Mira couldn't work out, were still stocked, though not fully. At some point, other people, other teens from Canaan must have come here and searched through the shelves. But, having nowhere to take the items, they left everything there, on the shelves or in small piles on the floor. Most of the items were inessential—clothing, cheaply made and so eaten by animals and bugs that they weren't wearable, strange statues and knickknacks, all half-broken or feeling vaguely sacrilegious, plastic bottles filled with discolored liquid, the labels faded.

There was only one store that really mattered: now called K YS B KS, the hole in its grate was so small that even the two of them, too small for 13, could barely fit. It was full of books—all worn, all yellowed-pages, stacked neatly on shelves like hardly a day had passed since the store was last open. It smelled like paper and damp, but it was the best thing Mira had ever smelled.

“I didn't know there were books besides the Bible,” Mira said. “And schoolbooks.”

Jonas just shook his head, dumbfounded, and sat in front of a shelf. He peered at the titles, putting his face merely a centimeter away so he could read. “*The Cat in the Hat.*”

Mira pulled one off another shelf. “*Hamlet.*”

“*The Rainbow Fish.*”

“*Pride and Prejudice.*” Mira read off the ink-smearred back and felt the thin, crinkly paper light in her hands. “These all sound stupid,” she said.

“Read me one.”

Mira nearly dropped the book. “What?”

“I want to read them.” Jonas’s voice was cool and measured. “But if I try, I’ll get a headache.” He met her eyes, and the tease died on Mira’s lips. “So you read to me.”

“Okay. Let’s go.” Mira sat cross-legged in front of him and pulled the book from his hands—a thin one, with a lantern and a furry-legged man in a scarf on the front. “*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* Should we read this? If there’s a witch?”

“Just *read*, Mir.”

She read.

She learned many things in that bookstore, every weekend. They’d sit on the floor for hours as Mira would read books to Jonas, eventually putting on voices to liven things up. The mall became their playground; within a year, Mira was sure she could travel the place blindfolded. They avoided the store with the near-naked pictures, of course, and when Mira stumbled upon a section of books with bare-breasted women on the cover, they avoided those, as well. In the grand scheme of things, there wasn’t much to do there outside reading books that tried to crumble every time they touched them and shouting into the echoey vestibule to make the birds flutter out. But in the grand scheme of things, there was more to do at the mall than back in Canaan, and fewer eyes on them.

The eyes of the adults in Canaan grew less subtle as the duo got older. Mira didn't come into puberty until she was fourteen, but it seemed all the women in town knew she'd bled by the end of the day. Her mother cried as she showed Mira how to replace her rags and how to boil them on the stove to sterilize them, though Mira had watched her do this for her whole life; had even boiled them herself when her mother miscarried and couldn't bring herself to move.

"You can be a mother, now," her mother said. She dropped the rags she'd been wringing out and took Mira's hands in her own. Both of their hands were red and raw from the hot water, and Mira almost winced in pain at the pressure. "Not for a few years, at least, of course. But let's hope you'll have an easier time than me."

Mira smiled, thinly. "Gotta find a husband first." She understood little about procreation, but she knew that Mom only got pregnant after she and Dad made a disconcerting amount of noise back in their bedroom. Plus, she'd seen the bull mate with any number of cows before. All-in-all, it looked and sounded *terrifying*. With her mother's birth experiences on top of that? And her near-constant fear that she'd see Caleb die? Mira was becoming more and more sure that she wanted nothing to do with marriage or children.

Her mother laughed. "You know Jonas is making eyes at you."

"What?"

"He *likes* you, my Miracle."

Mira let her hands dangle at her sides. "Of course he does. He's my best friend."

Her mother shook her head and laughed. "He wants to kiss you. You should see how he looks at you. Just how your father looked at me when we were younger." She picked up the rags she was washing and kept scrubbing at them.

“He *doesn't*,” she said, and a sharpness crept into her voice that she knew would get her in trouble later. “We’re too young for kissing anyway.”

Her mother’s eye grew slightly stony, then softened. “Of course you are. And remember that.” She tucked a strand of hair fallen from Mira’s braid behind her ear. “I just mean that one day you’ll get married to a sweet boy, and Jonas wouldn’t be a bad option.”

“Do I need to get married?” She knew the answer. Why did she even ask?

Her mother’s face shifted momentarily—her mouth fell open into a quiet *o*, but her eyes weren’t surprised or sad; they were screwed shut for the spare moment the expression lasted before she smiled and opened her eyes again, entirely unchanged from the placid, motherly expression she wore. “Marriage is a gift, baby doll. It’s a perfect symbol of you and your husband bonding together with God, and there’s nothing more beautiful than that. Except a baby of your own.”

“But Father McCade—”

“He’s a priest.” Her voice was flat. “He’s different. Chosen by God.”

“Well, what if I’m chosen by God, too?”

“You *aren't*.”

“But why—”

“*Because*, Miracle. Only men can be priests.”

“So I just have to get married? Nothing else?”

“You say it like it’s this horrible, awful thing!” She threw the rags into the dry basin with a slapping sound.

Mira’s mind flooded with angry images: her parents arguing about another pregnancy, her mother passing over her dinner so Mira and her father could have more, her mother, *bleeding*

and *crying*, her father collapsed against her shoulder after they buried yet another child. “Like it’s given you much good!”

“It’s given me you—”

“And *how* much have you lost.” It wasn’t a question; Mira knew as well as her mother. “How can you want me to go through that?”

Her mother’s eyes shut, and she released a heavy breath. She stood like that—silent, breathing, unseeing—for so long that Mira found the fire in her mind calming down. *Maybe I’ll just be infertile*, she thought, though the cramp building in her belly begged otherwise.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“Just remember God wills what he will,” she said, her voice quiet but heavy. “What will be will be. Go get the chickens’ eggs, Miracle.”

Mira obliged, and shoved all her ill-contrived anger away. *I’ll find her some chicory root*, she thought. *That’ll make her happy.*

It was easy, then, to move on and apologize. When she was fourteen and still had solid things to cling to: God’s will would play out, and God’s will would be best. Her mother was infallible, and only needed some dug-up root to make her happy again. Apologies were easy when you weren’t sure what you apologized for.

Mira began to finally understand the inevitability of her marriage and children when vocation lessons rolled around. Vocation lessons were an annual event. Father McCade would roll into their classroom with a box of worn books covered in pencil scribbles from previous generations and pass them out. They’d spend a day going over possible roles they could fill in the community (farmer, textile worker, toolmaker, Elder) and discuss the difference between

marriage and priesthood, which were the only options, and priesthood was only an option for one boy that Father McCade would, eventually, pick to be his successor. Mira and the rest of the children her age doubted that that successor would come from them, as Father McCade was only in his mid-forties like their parents, with probably at least fifteen years of service left in him. The children would chuckle at the mustache doodles and the younger girls would eye the boys when marriage was mentioned, but the day was unexciting. Mira, when she was younger, knew what she would do with her life: she'd marry a farmer and be a farmer and be perfectly happy with him, sharing the dirt creased on their palms.

But not long after that inevitable first menstrual cycle, the vocations class shifted for the fifteen children in Mira's class—all between thirteen and sixteen, all in their last years of school, and the only children that age who had survived. Their kindergarten class had thirty-two; in comparison to other age groups, they did pretty well. Jonas's father's age group had ended up with only twenty-eight out of ninety-seven when he was a teen, after a severe bout of flu ravaged the youth population. Each of her classmates was as familiar to her as her parents, and she disliked most of them—especially the boys, who'd taken her dandelion crowns as a small child and, as they grew older, held themselves above the others because they were stronger and because, as snub-nosed Paul Benson put it, they were “gonna be Elders one day.” Some of the other girls couldn't get enough of them, which was baffling. Mira would watch in class as Mary Ellen Ward would pass a love note from one side of the room to the other just for it to be crumpled up in Ezra Holland's sweaty, dirty hand, and would be similarly confused when Beth Anderson cultivated a pumpkin especially to give to Joseph Kelley, who, generally, could not be excited by anything.

The building of a relationship between Canaanites was uncomplicated. It was generally accepted that, by the time one came to marriageable age, they already had a spouse in mind. Mira's parents were married when they were seventeen, and they had known they'd marry each other by the time they were fifteen. While some took longer, they were the chief fuel of the gossip wheel—Emmanuel Stanford, who courted seven women before he picked one of them when he was twenty-four, was widely whispered to be the true father of Maryanna Winters' son, as he'd stopped courting her only a month before she married her husband. Everyone got married eventually; it was an inevitability, not an option, even if it was one that turned Mira's gut more and more every day.

"Today," Father McCade said to her class when Mira was 14, "I am going to teach you about God's greatest gift and Satan's greatest temptation."

He passed out other books—still old, and still covered in doodles, but the images and text within made Mira's face flush. She knew what genitals looked like, of course; she'd changed enough of Caleb's diapers to recognize a penis, and she was witnessing the changes to her own vagina and breasts with quiet embarrassment. Seeing the illustrations, however, of an adult penis and fully-developed vagina was startling, and she slammed the book shut.

The mechanics of sex were even worse. She'd witnessed the bull mate with the cow, of course, and knew that sex was what caused pregnancy; but hearing Father McCade describe in dry terms how the penis *entered* the vagina made her innards hurt. It didn't make logical sense. But she kept her mouth shut as the boys stifled laughter and made gestures she didn't understand, and Father McCade explained that sex was *only* for marriage and for children.

"The devil will convince you to seek it outside of God's covenant," he said. "But know that that is a sin and will only hurt you. Sex is only—*only*—for the procreation of children, and

children are our best resource to further live God's Word." He smiled beatifically. "Each woman should endeavor herself to be the image of our Mother, Mary."

Eventually, when it had gone on so long that Mira had torn up a whole sheet of paper trying to quell the anxiety thrumming through her, Father McCade dismissed class for lunch. Mira looked longingly at Jonas as he went to go sit with the boys, as lunch was separated by gender, but he nodded at her and mouthed, *mall, later*.

The girls already sat under a tree. The grass was brown and crunchy from the persisting summer, and Mary Ellen waved Mira over with a grin. "C'mon! Sarah's got *news*."

"News?" Mira asked. She pulled her lunch of a few pieces of dried meat and a hunk of seed-filled bread from her bag and started eating. Her stomach growled even as she ate.

Sarah—a loud girl, 16, whose brashness and gossiping tongue often made Mira sit as far away from her as possible—grinned, touching the tip of her pink tongue to her teeth. They weren't very yellow, Mira noted. Her family probably got a higher ration of Caravan-brought toothpaste, since her grandfather was a chief Elder.

"Me 'n Nathan Harkness..." she paused, unable to staunch a giggle that screeched in Mira's ears. "We *did it* behind the Andersons' barn the other day."

Mira suddenly did not want to eat her jerky. The other girls, like bees around a hive, buzzed about her asking for every detail.

"It felt *amazing*."

"I don't *think* I'm pregnant."

"It *did* look super weird, actually."

Mira plucked dry bits of grass from the ground and wished time would move faster.

"But won't your parents be upset?" Esther whispered. "That you guys... you know."

“Don’t worry,” Sarah said. Her grin split so wide Miracle thought her head should tear in half. “He promised me he’s gonna ask my dad to marry me.”

“What if he doesn’t?” Mira asked. “Or if your dad says no?”

Sarah’s grin froze on her face. “Not going to happen.”

“But *if*,” Mira insisted, though she wasn’t sure why. “It’s a *sin*.”

Few women got pregnant out of wedlock in Canaan. Whether it was the result of marrying young, the low number of younger people, or the constant, hand-slapping doctrine against having sex, Miracle never knew. Those who did were usually kept by their parents, though they’d almost never get married from the shame. Five years ago, a woman named Elisa got pregnant by Kellan Harkness, Nathan’s older brother, who was married. He stayed with his wife, while Elisa’s parents, ashamed of both having their daughter pregnant and being pregnant from an affair of all things, kicked her out. She wandered, pale and waiflike, taking any handout she could get, and when the Caravan came four months later, she left with them.

Sarah blanched. “It doesn’t matter. We’re getting married anyway. God won’t mind.”

The girls all fell silent until Father McCade called them back into the schoolhouse for history class.

Three weeks later, Sarah was out of school and married to Nathan Harkness, and six months later she miscarried for the first time. Miracle just watched and wondered why that was God’s will.

“You noticed people keep trying to shove us together?” Jonas remarked one evening in the bookstore. They couldn’t often get away in the evenings, but there was an adult retreat that night, and their parents and Mira’s grandfather would be gone all night. Mira had been in

progress of picking out their next book, debating between a book with a scaly beast on the cover and one with a cartoony spaceship, but she set them both down and sat beside Jonas when she noticed the look on his face—distant and unfocused, scratching at the patchy beard his fifteen-year-old face could barely sprout so much that his brown skin was turning red.

“Yeah,” Mira said. “Every freakin’ day.” She’d picked up *freakin’* from a book they’d read last week, and she couldn’t get over the allure of an almost-swear. It wasn’t taking God’s name in vain, so she was fine. She grabbed his wrist. “Stop scratching.” His pulse raced under her thumb.

Jonas turned on his butt towards her so his knees touched the outside of her thigh. “No, but I mean *really, really* trying.”

“Okay, you’re clearing thinking about something in particular, so just say it.”

Jonas turned back and let his back fall against the pitted wall with a sigh. “Annalee’s funeral, last week?”

Mira nodded. Annalee was a younger woman in Canaan—quiet, recently married to an apprentice smith named Kirk. She’d died a week ago from a summer fever. Miracle had attended the funeral, as was customary, but she hadn’t felt much besides general loss. Didn’t remember much of it, either. Caleb had been fussy the whole time, and with her mother having known Annalee more personally, Mira was set to minding him. “What happened?”

“Mrs. Ward told me, and I quote, ‘You’d better get that Beckett girl soon, or you’ll end up like Annalee and Kirk.’”

“What does that even *mean*?”

“I guess ‘cause they didn’t get married till they were twenty-something? And then Annalee died before she had kids?” Jonas exhaled heavily. “It’s stupid, is what it is.”

“And freakin’ rude, at her funeral!” Mira said. “Kirk or the Snyders didn’t hear her, right?”

Jonas shook his head. “My dad did, though.” He laughed, then, and it sounded more bitter than Mira was used to. “Didn’t say anything. Just looked at me and *nodded*.”

“Your dad,” Mira repeated. “He... wants us to...”

“I don’t know!” Jonas threw up his hands. “Court, I guess?”

“Are you really surprised?” Mira said. She looked at the book she still held in her hands and fiddled at the binding. “Mom’s been telling me we’ll get married at some point for ages.”

“Really?” Jonas touched his hand to her wrist. He was warm—he was always so warm. Once when she was very young and her mother was sick (though she understood now that she was recovering from a miscarriage), she’d been sent to stay for a night with Jonas and his family. It was winter, so she was put into the same bed as Jonas, and she felt like she’d slept directly next to the oven that whole night. His touch on her wrist, now, was feather light and still.

This feels nice, she thought. I should want to kiss him now.

“Yeah,” she said, instead. She bit her lip. “I’m wondering if they’re right?”

“That we should—”

“At least try?”

Jonas pulled his hand away, letting it fall blandly to his knee. “Do you—like me, Mira?”

Mira threw her head back onto her neck joint. “I don’t *know*! I think I’m supposed to? And I like you? But I don’t think I want to... you know?”

Jonas nodded and ran his tongue along his teeth beneath his lip—a motion he did when he was considering something particularly heavy that Mira always found hilarious. Except right now, as she felt nauseous and her head began to swim. “Ok, let’s go through the criteria.”

“Criteria?”

“For wanting to marry someone.” Jonas shrugged. “See if we fit.”

Mira laughed. She scooted around so that she and Jonas were facing each other and met his eyes with a determined look. “All right. Let’s do this.” She shut her eyes and considered her parents—how they moved around each other so easily in cramped spaces, and how they sometimes knew exactly what the other would say before they said it. “Understanding? Like, getting the other person?”

She opened her eyes to see Jonas smirking. “Why’d you shut your eyes like that, you dork.”

“I was *thinking*.” She smacked his shoulder. “Well?”

“We definitely get each other,” Jonas said. “What about compatibility? Like for a household.”

“I can grow a garden, of course,” Mira said. “And you can... cook, I guess?” She realized that, despite knowing nearly everything about the boy in front of her, she didn’t know what he wanted to *do*. What, as the priest would say, his vocation was.

“Better ‘n you, I guess.” Jonas’s mouth twisted.

She put her hand on his knee—gently, like he was a skittish calf. “What do you wanna do, Jo?”

Jonas shrugged. “I’ve been thinking a nurse, honestly? I don’t know. I like helping Mom out when people come in with broken bones or something. And I really liked when you read that book the other day? About all the human body stuff?”

Mira tried to hide her frown. “But—”

“I know,” he said shortly. “I know I won’t actually be able to. It’s a stupid idea.”

People had their place in Canaan; their vocation. There were some things some people couldn't do: girls couldn't be priests or teachers, and boys couldn't be nurses or seamstresses. It simply didn't happen.

They sat silently for a moment. "Ok, so we've got compatibility and understanding," Jonas said.

You should see how he looks at you. Just how your father looked at me when we were younger. Mira felt her face burn.

She'd seen her father look at her mother *that way* a few times. When things were good—when their pantries were filled with food and the weather wasn't too harsh; when Caleb had just been born and was thriving; when there was a party on the lawn of the church and the two of them would dance when the music got slow, pressing their hips together and her mother laying her head on his shoulder. He'd look at her with—it wasn't a *burn*, exactly. It crackled, like the air did when lightning struck the tree outside the church that one Easter Sunday. Looking at it, Mira felt like her hair should be standing on end, like she should feel electrified just by watching them.

"What about attraction?"

Jonas's mouth opened slightly, and she felt his eyes—brown, soft, like almost everyone's in Canaan—trace from her forehead to her crossed legs to back to her eyes. "I don't know."

"We could—" Mira cut herself off. "We could try to kiss?" Her brow creased. "It's not a sin if it's just a kiss, right?"

"I don't think so?" Jonas scooped closer so their knees touched. "How do we do this?"

Mira blinked. She grabbed his wrist. "I think you should touch my face?" His palm touched her cheek. It was warm and familiar, but alien where he touched her. *Do I lean in?*

“Maybe you touch my hip?” he said. Mira reached her hand out and grasped for his hip, only to find that she needed to lean forward slightly to reach it. Jonas, gamely, didn’t move his hand and adjusted his position with her, even as she knew she flushed even redder and her hand scrabbled for a grip on his hip. Finally, she settled, and they met eyes. *It’s Jonas. If I can kiss anyone, it’s Jonas.*

“Do we just—”

“So I guess we—”

They laughed, then—at their confusion, at the speaking in unison, at the absurdity of it all. They laughed for so long that Mira collapsed onto her back and clutched at her stomach when her sides began to hurt. For a moment, everything was normal again: they were children, sitting in their secret place, laughing like nothing had changed and there were no expectations, no weight of Godly duty on their shoulders.

Then Jonas, who had not collapsed from laughter, leaned over Mira where she lay and kissed her square on the lips.

His lips were chapped and too-solid. The barest bits of his stubble on her cheek pricked like bark. Neither of them moved. Mira’s eyes were open, though his were shut; she wasn’t sure which was correct. *How long do we stay like this?* she thought. *How long until it’s over?* Her heart beat so hard she was sure he could hear it. *Please don’t touch me.*

Jonas stopped kissing her. He hovered over her, his mouth open and wet and his eyes round. “Good?” There was a tremor of uncertainty in his voice that matched the shaking in her hands.

I should lie. I should tell him I liked it. Then he’ll say he did, and we’ll get married in a few years, and it’ll be fine. We’ll get through this.

No, she thought. *This is Jonas. I can't lie to him.*

"No," she said. "It wasn't."

Jonas sat back on his haunches and scratched at his knobby beard. He tilted his head towards the ceiling, shutting his eyes and sighing heavily.

"I'm sorry—I don't know what's *wrong* with me—we can try some more if you really—"

"Thank *God*."

"Thank God?"

"I hated it too."

Relief washed over her hot and soothing, like a sip of hot broth when the wind rattled through the boards of their winter house. *Some things never change.*

Mira patted the ground beside her, and Jonas laid down. He stretched out his arm and she laid her head on the little bit of cushion his too-bony arm provided.

"What now?" Jonas asked.

Mira reached blindly and grabbed a book from the ground. "I can read you something from *Space Travel for the Intergalactic Teen?*"

"Sounds perfect."

The next year went by almost hilariously normally. Their parents insinuated they'd get together soon enough and everyone else assumed they were already together, so no one spoke to either of them with any intent of romance—which Mira finally decided she preferred. They went to the mall on the weekends and read about things they could never touch, leaning against each other with no barrier of attraction or confusion between them.

“Maybe we’ll get married eventually,” Jonas suggested one spring day. “And just live together and pretend.”

“What about when people ask about children?”

“We’ll say one of us can’t.”

“We’ll change who it is every time they ask,” Mira said. “Just to confuse them.”

Then came summer. A year after their ill-advised kiss, at the beginning of May. Winter had stretched on that year, staying frigid all the way until Easter. Then Easter Monday dawned to 95-degree heat, and all of Canaan knew instantly that there would be no spring.

Not even their summer houses could keep them anything near cool. Mira slept naked each night, hoping some cool breeze would sneak its way into her room, but awoke every morning in a pool of sweat that never cooled her the way it should. Crops they’d barely attempted to grow dusted in the fields before the summer thunderstorms came to rattle everything and the ground turned to unplatable mud. The Mississippi flooded and refused to retreat until the heat returned and baked the water into the ground. Mira tried to grow anything she could, the hardiest things she could find seeds for—sorrel, turnips, potatoes. She even pulled dandelions from the riverbed and transplanted them by her house before the river flooded. Nearly all of them roasted, no matter how much water she poured on them from the rain barrels. The potatoes and turnips lived, but the yield was less than ideal, especially when she was one of the only people sensible enough to plant them. Their stomachs ached from hunger, and more cows and chickens were slaughtered that summer than they usually ever would, simply so they could survive. Luckily, some of the cows’ feed managed to survive, and there was enough stockpiled in the Mayfields’ barn so, though they thinned, none died that weren’t slaughtered for meat. No

Canaanites died, either, though they were weakened and skeletal at each Sunday service, praying through thin lips that they'd make it until winter.

Then in August came the sickness. Waterborne, they eventually figured out, but not until everyone had drunk from the afflicted wells and had spent hours squatting over the nearest outhouse or makeshift hole dug in the ground. Many recovered, having only a day or so of gastrointestinal distress, but a worryingly large portion of Canaan grew sicker. They burned from fever and vomited any liquid they were fed, and they shook and shook no matter how much willow bark tea or Caravan-brought aspirin they swallowed.

Mira's grandfather was one of them. Always hale and healthy compared to other men in Canaan, with a natural barrel chest and a beard that refused to grey even into his sixties, everyone who knew him expected him to die out in his fields one day, not quitting his work until God took him home. Instead, he died shaking on a cot, unable to even squeeze his granddaughter's hand on his last day.

His funeral was abbreviated, as Father McCade had far too many other graves to attend. Mira, her parents, Caleb, and a few of her grandfathers' friends were the only ones who attended as he was buried at the edge of their family graveyard, right beside the garden he'd built with Mira. The remaining plants in the earth beside him were nothing but shriveled leaves, which Mira found fitting. Not right that anything like that should live when he could die.

Jonas did not attend, because his father's funeral was Father McCade's next stop. Simon Prior died a few measly hours after Peter Beckett, and when Jonas came to seek solace in Miracle, he found her curled on the dirt of her garden. They wrapped themselves around each other and cried until they couldn't tell whose tears dampened whose shirt.

Death was a gift, they'd been told. It was loss, and it was worthy of mourning, but for the loss of that person's presence on Earth. But, they were told, it was a gift for the one who had passed: no more toiling, no more work, no more fear, only God's great arms opening up and taking them to heaven, where all God's children knew they would go someday. Life was hard in Canaan, they said. Life was God's great test for his children, but it was all worth it for what would come after.

Miracle couldn't find those words in her to tell Jonas as they cried together. All she could think was how unfair it was that God couldn't have just kept that sickness out of the water and out of his people. How unfair it was that all they could do was lay there and cry as their grandfather and father's bodies already began to warm and stink in the oppressive, endless heat.

"Do you think they have funerals in space?" Mira murmured. "Do you think they die like this?"

Jonas snorted and wiped his nose messily across his arm. "Doubt it. They have hospitals there, and medical treatment, and water purifiers, air conditioning, and *food*." He tore one of the dead plants out of the ground and chucked it as far as he could. "They actually have a *chance!* They don't have the whole *freakin'* planet trying to send them a message."

Mira looked nervously at her house, but no one came out. "Jonas, you gotta—"

"What? Just shut up and grow up and marry you and die because of one bad summer? *No*. I won't do it. I'm gonna get out of here."

Her stomach grew cold even in the heat. "You can't."

His brown eyes were flinty. "Why?"

"Because—" Mira tried, but nothing she could think of made sense: *because they say it's a sin, because your mother won't let you, because I can't lose you*. Sin seemed far away right

now, and they would be of age soon, and Jonas could leave her if he wanted. “I don’t know, Jonas. It just—it doesn’t make sense!”

Jonas didn’t speak. He knocked his head back and looked up at the stars. It was a clear night, and the sky looked almost entirely white with stars, with only pinpricks of blue in between. Mira wondered which were stars and which were space stations, full of more people than Mira could comprehend existing. “None of this makes sense, Mir.”

The funerals passed, and the weather stayed hot, and all of Canaan was quiet. There were 962 people in New Canaan when the summer began. By the time the winter finally came to frost the world in fresh silver, there were 630. All those who remained curled into themselves like pillbugs and wondered how much more God would make them handle.

“We’re leaving, when the Caravan comes.”

Mira, who had been mid-paragraph of a book about a sinking ship, just laughed. “Yeah, sure, and Father McCade’s gonna tell us all to have wild premarital sex.”

Jonas’s face was stone. “We are, Mira. Mom and I. We’re leaving.”

“You can’t.” Mira slammed the book shut. “You *can’t* leave.”

“We can, and we will.”

Mira’s head pounded. “Your mom wants to go?”

“Says Dad’s been the only thing keeping the two of us here for the last fifteen years.”

“But you’ll die,” she said, and she heard the limpness in her tone as her eyes screwed shut. “And you won’t go to heaven, and the Second Coming won’t—”

“Miracle.” His hands enveloped hers, warm and calloused. “We want you to come, too.”

Everything halted. Her heartbeat, her breath, the all-encompassing panic in her mind.

“What?”

“I don’t want to leave you,” Jonas said.

I can’t have you leave me, Mira thought.

“But my parents,” Mira whispered. “And Caleb.” Sweet, lucky little Caleb, who was just starting to get his grubby little hands in the dirt alongside Mira, who toddled out to her asking about beans.

“Your parents are too stubborn.” He squeezed her hands. “*Everyone* here is too stubborn. We’re dying here. And soon there’s not going to be anybody left. How is this what God wants?”

Because it’s what Father McCade says, she thought, but she shrugged.

“I don’t want you to die.” He bit his lip. “I don’t want you to, but I’m leaving regardless.”

“I might not die,” Mira said. She pulled her hands out of his. “I’m good in my garden—”

“And how much yield did you get this year?” His tone was flat, rather than combative; she wished he’d fight.

“Enough.”

“Liar.”

They both leaned back against the parallel bookshelves. How many hours had they spent in here, reading about places they would never be able to go to? About Mars, and stations, and restaurants and Paris. Places where your belly was always full and you could live by yourself, without a husband. Where, maybe, she could grow a garden that wouldn’t die. Where she could grow flowers.

“Okay,” Mira said, not quite believing what she was saying even as she said it. “I’ll go.”

Packing was almost impossible. She had a bag she'd used for her lunch for school, so she stuck a few bare things in there; her favorite wool sweater, the trowel her grandfather gave her, the barely held-together children's Bible passed down to her. Anything else would be noticed, and anything else she, hopefully, wouldn't need. She did take books from the mall, tying them in thin twine taken from the communal barn and sneaking them under her bed a few nights before the Caravan's arrival. Her favorites—*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, a thick, illustrated guide on planting flowers she'd pore through for hours, a children's pop-out book about space stations, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, which she didn't quite understand but liked anyway.

If her parents noticed she was around home more often than she'd been in a while, they said nothing. She took over dinner for her mother and helped her father mind the chickens without a complaint. When her father noted that there was a small leak in one of the rain barrels, Mira went out with a hammer and a patch and closed it up. Caleb thrived, as Miracle let him follow her around wherever she went. She took him to the river and bit into a ripe cattail just to make him laugh at the exploding cloud of pollen, and didn't even mind when the fluff stuck in the back of her mouth. She chased him outside and sat on the floor with him playing with his cracked wooden train set for as long as he wanted to.

She didn't say goodbye. She snuck her books in her bag and swung it on her back, and made up some lie about wanting to gather cattails with Jonas after the Caravan left. She went with them to the Caravan. She knew there would be a fight, but she knew she couldn't stop her parents from coming.

When she saw Jonas and his mother standing apart from the rest of Canaan, worn duffels in hand, she met Jonas's eyes and smiled. His smile was shaky, but his eyes were bright. *We're doing this*, Mira thought. *We're actually doing this.*

Ruth was there, the shaved-headed woman they had talked to years ago. Mira hoped she'd be proud of them. She hoped her mother wouldn't cry too much.

When the Presenter finished her speech and opened her arms to the bedraggled remains of Canaan, Jonas and his mother stepped forward. Mira had never thought of Marianne Prior as particularly strong. She sickened easily and was even smaller than the average, already small Canaanite woman. But she walked towards the Caravan with her head high, stepping like her bag weighed nothing. Jonas followed barely behind. Mira's mother gasped and said, "No—"

Mira barely took two steps forward before her father gripped her arm, vice-like, and rasped in her ear, "Do *not*."

"Dad—"

"Miracle?" Her mother's voice, shrill. The crowds' murmurs, which began as the Priors walked up, grew louder.

Mira shut her eyes as her father spun her roughly around. She couldn't see them—not the redness that must be rushing up her mother's face, not the screwed-up anger in her father's eyebrows. Not the wide brown eyes on Caleb's tiny face as she heard him say, "Mir?"

"You are *not* leaving," her father said, as her mother began to audibly cry. His fingers dug deeper into her arm, hard pressure points into her bare flesh.

"Abraham." Mrs. Prior's voice, closer than it should have been. Mira still couldn't bear to open her eyes. "She wants to leave. I'll take care of her—you know I will."

"She's *my* daughter!" A cold hand latched onto Mira's frozen wrist; her mother's, she knew, never warm enough. She'd stick her hands on Mira's neck just to make her laugh and squirm when it was summer and Mira would come back in from outside, her skin turned red and

hot under the sun. *Stop thinking. You need to leave.* The hands moved to cup her face. “You’re my baby.”

“And she wants to leave.” Jonas. He sounded so young, so brash.

“Are you this young lady’s parents?” An unfamiliar voice, but measured and serene, despite the chaos Mira knew was unfolding even with her eyes shut. The Presenter. *She’ll stop this. She can take me away. She’ll take his hands off me. We’ll go, and I’ll plant flowers, and I’ll see how big the stars are.*

“We are,” her father said. “And you *aren’t* taking her, you—you—”

“I will not be,” the Presenter said, and an emptiness soured Mira’s stomach. Her eyes fell open.

Her mother was crying. Her father’s face was red as a sunburn. Caleb’s little bow of a mouth was open and wavering. She shut her eyes again.

“*Unfortunately*, a minor needs parental permission to leave,” the Presenter said. “And you are a minor, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” her father said. “She *is*.”

“But—” Jonas started.

“Jonas,” Mrs. Prior said. “If they won’t let us take her, then we can’t.”

“But I want to go.” Mira wasn’t sure if the words even came out. “I want to go.”

“And you can when you are of age,” the Presenter said. “No one can stop you then. There is a *reason*—” her voice grew louder, to ensure the whole crowd could hear her. “—we come every year. To take whoever wants to find a better life.”

“We have a fine life here, ma’am,” Father McCade said. “A holy life. One with strife, sure, but one blessed.”

“And you may believe that,” the Presenter said. “But you also have a tenet of free will, don’t you?”

“That does not—” her father said.

“Are the boxes unpacked?” the Presenter asked. “Good. Now, I believe that my Caravan and I will be leaving, with anyone who wants to and can leave.”

“Mira!”

Jonas.

Mira opened her eyes and tried to pull herself from her father’s grip. “Let me go!”

“Absolutely not.”

“Let me say *goodbye!*” Her father’s face blurred into a red blob as her eyes filled with tears. “Let me say goodbye, *please!*”

“Abraham,” her mother whispered. “Just for a moment.”

His hand loosened for half a second, and Mira pulled out of his grip while she could and dashed to where Jonas stood. His dark skin was ashen, and he pulled her into a hug. “It’s gonna be okay,” he said shakily. “It’s gonna.”

“No, it’s not,” she said into his shoulder.

“Yeah, it will.” His hand rubbed her back, slowly, soothingly. “You’re gonna get up there so soon I won’t even miss ya.”

“Impossible.”

“What?” Jonas pulled back and smirked at her. “Think you’ll need a *miracle?*”

She laughed wetly and wiped her nose on her arm. “Shut up.” She fell back onto his shoulder and breathed him in. “I love you,” she breathed out.

“I love you, too.”

A harsh tug on her arm ripped her away from Jonas. “That’s *enough*,” her father said. “We’re going home.”

She didn’t see the ship fly off, only hearing the distant *whoosh* of its launch as her father dragged her away.

Father McCade’s presence at their door the next morning didn’t surprise her. After all, they hadn’t even known someone was going to defect before it happened. It would be a fine experiment, she figured, to see if they could keep someone with one foot halfway out the door.

“Miracle,” he said, his smile wide and his voice full of warm sincerity. “Why don’t we take a walk?”

Mira lingered at the door, holding tightly onto the handle. “I’d prefer not to, Father, if that’s all right.”

“Go with him,” her father said. His tone had not softened toward her since yesterday’s incident; last night, he hadn’t even spoken to her, just retiring to his bedroom and only coming out to silently eat the root mash her mother made. “That’s not a request.”

Father McCade opened his arms, like he did on the altar, but the effect was diminished, as he wore a long-sleeved black shirt worn to grey and brown slacks rather than his vestments. More of a plain, ruffled blackbird than the upright, brightly-colored thing he inhabited with every Canaanite’s eye on him. “Just a walk, Miracle.”

She plastered on a smile and shut the door behind her. “Where to, Father?”

They took a loop of Canaan—the whole settlement, crossing between abandoned buildings they ignored and sparse farm fields, passing Canaanites packing up their summer houses outside to move into their winter houses, passing the general store and the small, smoky

smithy. It was still hot out, but not the sweltering heat that had cursed them all summer. This was a slightly broken heat, tampered by a northerly wind that heralded the cold that was sure to snap in soon.

To his credit, he did just talk. Initially, about normal things—the people they passed, the weather, how her brother was faring. Mira hadn't often had much one-on-one time with the priest, as his time was divided between every citizen, but he had always been an easy man to talk to. Unintimidating, with his short, wiry stature and straw-colored hair so thin that the barest wind would ruffle it into a translucent, wavering coxcomb. Then, as their path curved past the schoolhouse, she knew the conversation took a turn.

“You and Jonas were always close, weren't you?”

“He's my best friend,” she said, carefully.

He nodded. “The two of you were pretty much assured to get married. We were all placing bets on when the announcement would come, if I can be honest.” He grinned sideways at her. “I was betting on next month. I was looking to get a few fresh loaves of bread from Ms. Fuerst, if I'd bet right.” He cocked his head to the side and clicked his tongue. “Looks like no one's winning or losing.”

“Looks like.”

They walked on, silently. They passed the swingset, where one wooden swing spun aimlessly on its chain.

“What I don't understand, with that knowledge, Miss Beckett—” he swung his hands behind his back and latched them together, “is why the two of you just didn't wed before the Caravan came?”

Mira worried at the inside of her cheek and shrugged.

“You’d have been free from your parents’ control, you know, as a married woman. You both could’ve gone and lived however you fools wanted to as husband and wife. Away from your home.”

She shrugged again. *Because I can’t marry him*, she thought. *Because we don’t want that.*

“Is there any reason for that, Miracle? Any... lack of desire? For God’s covenant?”

She said nothing. She began to taste blood, but couldn’t stop gnawing at her cheek.

He tsked. “Miracle, we didn’t raise women to not have opinions here.”

No, Mira thought. *You raised no one to have opinions.*

The church was in sight now, its half-broken spire still towering above everything else. The spire had broken during a bad thunderstorm in June, but the normal church mechanic had died two weeks later, so it had yet to be fixed. Snapped wood and its metal cross still laid in a neat pile on the ground.

“Miracle—”

“We didn’t want to get married. I *don’t* want to get married, or have children, or ever have sex.” She stopped and stood in front of the priest, meeting his eyes with an expression she hoped was intimidating. “We were keeping the charade, and maybe we’d have gotten married if we didn’t think we could *leave* this place, but we can, so we didn’t. Because we *don’t want that.*”

He nodded, but she knew it wasn’t in understanding or agreement. “Is it from lack of attraction?” He spoke like she was a puzzle to figure out. “Or a desire to rebel against your parents? Or a dissatisfaction for God’s plan? Anger at this year’s tragedies? Genuinely, Miracle, I am curious.”

“And I don’t want to tell you.” She knew all the answers—*yes*, it was lack of attraction, to Jonas, to *anyone*; *yes*, it was anger, at God, at the man in front of her; *yes*, it was *every* tragedy

she could never avoid here, from her first crop of green beans shriveling to husks to the backyard graveyard filled with babies' bones to her grandfather's limp hand in hers as he died. She didn't want him to know the truth, or for him to have fodder to convince her to stay and marry someone and pop out children or whatever he wanted her to do. "Are we done talking, Father?"

He held up a finger. "Come with me to pray, first." The finger extended into an open palm, offered to her. "You always loved the church."

A few months ago, Mira would've taken his hand. She would've been led into the church, and she would have knelt, and she would have prayed. But now, with Jonas gone and nothing left for her here but her parents (who would hardly speak to her) and Caleb (who couldn't understand), any thoughts of prayer were lost to her. Instead, she just shook her head, and stepped backwards, and when he stepped towards her, she began to run.

The following year passed in a blur of denials and rejections. Father McCade forced her on walks at least once a week, even in the winter when it was too cold for such a thing. After a few months, she wouldn't speak at all, just half-listening to his questions and especially pointed sermons about hell and choice and her vocation. Her mother tried to convince her to marry a man fifteen years her senior who was looking for a wife: "He's got kids already, so you could probably avoid that," she said, like the idea of sharing a bed and a home with any man didn't make Mira sicken. Her mother didn't push the issue; her passivity never changed. Her father hardly spoke to her outside of telling her to go with Father McCade and to finish necessary domestic tasks. The mall was empty without Jonas, so she never went.

Two things stayed the same: her garden and Caleb. As if the Earth itself was trying to convince her to stay, the year was kind to Canaan. Still too hot and still too cold, but no catastrophic weather destroyed anything and no bugs ravaged the plants. The crops flourished,

especially Mira's garden. Enough grew that they could eat until they were full and still have plenty to dry and store for a winter that Mira wouldn't be there for. If she took less food on her plate so more would be left, no one acknowledged it.

Her parents, thankfully, didn't restrict her from Caleb. Now four, he would run around with ceaseless energy, and Mira would run right along with him. She taught him what she could: how to swim in the shallow part of the river, and how to tell what cattails were ripe and what plants were edible; how to dig holes in the ground and how to plant seeds in them; how to chase the chickens with sticks to drive them crazy and how to tell when a cow is rearing to kick; how to stay quiet in church and *maybe*, maybe how to question what came out of Father McCade's smiling mouth.

She didn't tell him she was leaving when the Caravan came, because she knew he would tell her parents. Not from any malice, or any desire to keep her here outside of not wanting to lose his sister. But he was four, and four-year-olds can't keep secrets. She told him the same lie she told her parents, who were too willing to believe she'd changed her mind after hours of walks with Father McCade.

The people at the Caravan didn't ask her age when she was already sitting in the field when they arrived; she was close enough to 18, she thought, that it didn't matter if she lied by a few months. One small sin was fine in the long run. The Caravan's door opened, and a woman with a shaved head and concern on her face stepped out.

"Miracle," Ruth said. "You decided to come."

"I need to leave, *please*."

Mira was hidden in a small part of the Caravan's vehicle, with no window and a lock on the door. She heard voices shouting outside, but heard the Presenter and Ruth insisting they

hadn't seen a young girl named Miracle anywhere. A few hours later, she pressed her face against a wide window, watching as Canaan shrank to imperceptibility on the whole of the Earth as she took her first clean breaths outside the Earth's atmosphere.

Interlude: Immersion

How do you feel, Beckett?

Mira opens her eyes only to reflexively close them as the sharp sunlamp above her spikes a headache. “Like shit.”

Bex makes a disappointed *beep*. **I apologize; there is little way to make memory catalysis more comfortable.**

“It’s fine,” Mira says. “I asked for it this time.” She rolls to her side and slits one eye open. Less bright, and the grass smells sweet. Tolerable.

Are you still in pain?

Mira thought her answer to that question would be too complex and human for a robot to understand, so she said, “Nah. I’m okay. Hungry.” Wasn’t a lie—she wasn’t sure how many hours she was under that time, but her stomach aches not from nausea, but from too-familiar hunger pangs.

She scrapes herself off the ground and stumbles to the kitchen, where she chugs a whole bottle of cold water and sticks the first meal she finds in the microwave. Soon the cheesy, artificial smell of prepackaged chicken parmesan reaches her nose, and it takes all of her self-control to not tear it out of the microwave before it is done. While waiting, she peruses the food cabinet. “Guess I should consider my last meal,” she said. “How many hours ‘til I croak, now?”

Approximately 120.

Mira yawns as she pulls the chicken parm out of the microwave. She fans on it to disperse the worst of the steam before shoving a massive bite in her mouth. It burns, but she chews and swallows fast enough that the burn hits her throat more than her tongue. Maybe it’s

the warmth in her stomach, but her eyelids are heavy. “Does memory cataly-whatever count as sleep?”

Bex’s faux face appears on a screen that pops out of the counter with a soft *click*. **It is, technically, dreaming, but the strenuous nature leads to less conducive sleep.**

Mira takes a swallow of water. “So I should probably go sleep.”

Probably.

For one spare moment, Mira considers washing the plate and fork. *My corpse will probably be a bigger problem than dried tomato sauce*, she thinks wryly. She sets them in the sink, doesn’t run water over it, and makes her way to her bunk.

Sleep comes easily, which ordinarily Mira would welcome. But dreams come along with sleep, and the dreams are unwelcome.

Jonas comes first: still young and spotty-looking. He is bone-thin, thinner than he usually was, and his beard doesn’t do enough to hide the sharpness of his cheeks. He looks sixteen, but he speaks with his child voice: high, quiet, like he isn’t sure he should make a sound. “Did you really think I’d be happy?” His mouth stretches into a tight smile as his eyes grow wet and red. He holds out a hand, and a disembodied, feminine hand takes it: her nails like claws, black and rough-sharp. “This is my wife. We are—” the edges of his mouth split, leaking dark red blood. “We are happy.”

Mira feels hot hands on her hip and a chin on her shoulder. “I told you he was happy without you.” Hestia’s voice, raspy and familiar. “We can be happy, too—” her hands dig into Mira’s hips, and no matter how hard she twists out she will not let go, “if you’d just leave it all behind.”

“I can’t,” Mira says. “I don’t—”

A kiss on her neck, hot and open-mouthed. “We are happy,” Hestia says, her voice warm like honey. “Come back to bed. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

Her grandfather appears next to Jonas: grey and wan, sweating and bleary-eyed like he was before he died. He smiles. “You’ll feel better in the morning.”

Hestia takes her hand and pulls her away. “I’ll feel better,” Mira says. “I’ll feel—”

She wakes up curled tight into a ball, cold all over. Her thin blanket had fallen to the floor, and the air feels thin. “Bex,” she croaks. “Bex, oxygen levels?”

Oxygen levels are still normal. There are still 113 hours until oxygen levels reach a dangerous low.

Every breath feels thin, fragile—fluttery, like a moth’s wing. Like her heartbeat, when Hestia kisses her.

“Can you send me back in?” Mira says. “I want—I want to see her. Her, and Oz, and—”

Memory catalysis will begin shortly, Bex says, and her voice washes over her as soothing as sunlight, as a memory of an embrace.

Part Three: Hestia

Mira had always expected stars to be bigger up close. But here she was, looking out a spotless window into the Earth's atmosphere, and the stars looked just as far away as they always had. She tried to not feel a sense of loss.

A hand touched her shoulder as Ruth sidled up beside her. "Pretty, isn't it?"

Mira nodded.

The hand squeezed. "C'mon, sweetheart. We've got a few things to go over."

Mira nodded.

Ruth pulled her into a small, pastel-colored room with a desk and two soft chairs. On the desk, in front of the chair Mira figured she should take, sat a plate with food—a disappointing amount, Mira couldn't help but think, after hearing about the supposed bounty of space living. Still, it looked good: two pieces of roast chicken, the skin crispy and black-speckled, a mashed potato with a melting square of butter, and some white vegetable she couldn't place. Beside the plate was a small cup of pills and a glass of perfectly clear water with *ice* in it.

Ruth sat across from her and gestured towards the plate. "Go on and eat."

"What's this?" Mira pointed at the vegetable. "And those?"

"Cauliflower," Ruth said. "It's good, I promise. And those are vitamin supplements—iron, zinc, Vitamin A... things that it's likely you haven't gotten enough of. It's perfectly safe."

It was bland, is what it was, but it was filling, and the meat was the first she'd had in months. There was a seasoning on the bird that made her tear up and want to cough, but she held it in so Ruth wouldn't find her rude. The potatoes were heavenly, and she barely stopped herself from licking the drips of butter off the plate, instead using her spoon to scrape every bit she could off.

“Glad to see you liked it.,” Ruth said. “Now, we’ve got some annoying protocol stuff to get through, so bear with me.”

The “protocol” lasted over an hour, and by the end of it her head hurt. She would be put on a strict diet, she learned, for three weeks; meals would slowly increase in option and quantity, so she wouldn’t overeat and make herself sick. When they reached the Moon (the *Moon*—Mira still couldn’t quite believe it), she would be placed in a temporary care home, where her health would be monitored and she could have time to get on her feet. She’d also be given a \$5,000 monthly stipend—Mira had no idea if that was a lot or a little bit of money, but she just nodded along. She nodded along the whole time, really. Ruth was easy to listen to, and Mira wasn’t exactly in a place to know what else she could do. So she let her fingerprints be taken and her body weighed and her height measured. She only flinched a little when vaccines were injected into her shoulder, and only a little more when a syringe slipped behind her ear to inject what Ruth called a “mindlink.” She followed Ruth into a bathroom and listened as she explained how a shower worked, and she cleaned herself with sweet-smelling, smooth soap when Ruth left the room. A plastic-covered sign pinned to the shower curtain said to take only a ten-minute shower, but no one stopped her, so she stayed in there until her toes went pruny and her skin turned red. When she stepped out, Ruth joked that she didn’t know she was bringing a lobster to the Moon, and she explained what a lobster was when Mira asked.

“Do you have any requests?” Ruth asked. “We can give you specific styles of clothes in your wardrobe, or provide you with some books or other entertainment? Can even add stuff to your mindlink—if you want to control the lights remotely, or—”

“I want to cut my hair,” Mira said. “Short. Like yours.”

She felt off-balance when her head was shaved. She was glad, more than ever, that the ship they were on had artificial gravity, or else she may have never gotten her footing. She looked at the long brown ponytails curled like snakes on the ground and ran her hand over her head, feeling for the first time the bumps of her skull and the baby softness of the ends of her hair.

“Can I have a garden?”

Her apartment was small and plain-furnished—one room plus a bathroom, with the kitchen and living room cozied up together and her bed behind a curtain across the room. There was a window, however, from which she could look out onto the grassy lawn. *Shockingly* green—almost fake-looking in its vibrance, but Ruth and the other people she encountered when she dared to venture out her door swore it was real. Moon dirt, when treated with the proper bacteria and fertilizer and trapped beneath the oxygen-rich dome Mira could always see the edge of, was remarkably fertile. She couldn't have a garden, as there was no lawn she could tamper with, but she could have potted plants in her windowsill that another one of the Friendlies dropped at her door.

She rarely left her apartment. The city was loud and overwhelming, even the park she stumbled her way to one afternoon. Nearly every person she spoke to ignored her, and she got lost more often than she found anything interesting. Leaving, she began to believe, was more trouble than it was worth. A secondary reason was rebellion against Ruth—that if she wanted her to leave and explore and meet people, she would do the exact opposite, just to spite her. The rebellion she knew was foolish and misplaced, but it was something she couldn't shake since she learned the truth.

“We can’t locate Jonas for you,” Ruth had said, her tone clipped but her eyes apologetic.

“We can’t legally disclose the locations of any of the people we have assisted.”

“Why?” Mira asked. “He’d *want* me to find him—he *told me* to come to him!”

“It’s for safety,” Ruth continued. “If someone was in a bad situation with someone, they could come here; if we gave them their information, they could be put right back into that abuse.”

Mira instinctively reached to wrap her hair in her hands and tug, only to unsatisfyingly grasp for nothing on her buzzed scalp. “But that’s not the situation we’re in! He’s—he’s my best friend.”

Ruth held up her hands in surrender. “I’m sorry, but there’s nothing we can do. Either of you can independently seek each other out, but we cannot facilitate.”

“That’s stupid.”

Ruth sighed. “It’s protocol. How about I show you how to use the Internet—”

“I can figure it out myself.”

“Miracle—”

“If you show me that, you’ll be *facilitating me* in finding him, wouldn’t you?” Mira shook her head roughly. “No. I’m not stupid, and you don’t have to coddle me. I can handle this.”

She was behaving petulantly and irrationally, she knew. If she was home, and a child, her father would make her sit in a corner until she got over it, and her mother would sneak her a small toy to play with to distract herself. But she was on the Moon, and alone, and the one person she sought to find was interminably far away, so she would behave however she felt she must.

One month later, Mira stared at the tablet on the squat table by the couch she lay across. “You’re stupid, and I hate you,” she said. The tablet didn’t respond, though she wouldn’t have been surprised if it did. Of course, another reason she had yet to explore the Moon more than the frantic, barebones first tour Ruth took her on was that everything was loud and big and unfamiliar, and she hated it. Her apartment, she swore, was the only place without bright, buzzing lights or people in strange clothes or endless voices overlapping. She kept her tablet powered off after only a few strokes on its glowing screen got her nowhere she wanted to go and a dull headache.

Then, a few days ago, she’d entered the wrong passcode so many times that the tablet was locked indefinitely. It said so right on the screen—LOCKED INDEFINITELY, in big, helpful red letters that wouldn’t go away no matter how much she swiped.

“That’s a problem for another day,” she said to no one, and got off the couch to go take another shower in the blissfully hot water. *Jonas will find me soon.*

Two weeks later, she’d managed to lock her tablet again and there was still no word from Jonas. She didn’t even know how he would get word to her, besides sending something to the number that had been registered to her mindlink, contacting her through her tablet, or showing up on her doorstep. Mindlink contact was out, as the only messages she’d received were Ruth’s rapidly dwindling check-ins (“Get out of the house! Go make some friends! Connections!”), and no one had shown up at her door besides her twice-daily food delivery. The only possibility left was her *stupid* tablet, which she could not figure out. So she needed to leave her apartment and find someone who could fix it.

It was late in the afternoon when Mira finally stepped outside her front door onto the concrete sidewalk of the city of Armstrong, after looking out her window for hours trying to decide when the roads would be least packed. When the steady influx of people didn't change for two hours and she knew the dome would begin to close within the next two to plunge the city into artificial night, she folded her tablet up to fit in her pocket and left, her heart pounding.

She felt like an idiot as soon as she stepped into the throng. Why had she isolated herself for so long? This was no harder than walking through people at one of the festivals—equally busy, if less familiar. It was easy, walking through town. Sure, she was shoved a few times, but she was small and nimble enough to be able to avoid most people who fail to notice her.

Many people hardly seemed to see her, which was exhilarating in the strangest way. Anonymity was an unfamiliar feeling, and one Mira found herself relishing. She could do anything, and no one would give her a dirty look or report her antics to her parents or grandfather.

Her apartment was just outside the city center, but the area was nonetheless filled with business and residences alike. Delicious aromas graced her nose—some she could place, like onion and fried potatoes, but others were sharper and unfamiliar, but still enticing. *Restaurants*, she recalled. *Takeout*. She stepped into the nearest restaurant and bought what the person in front of her ordered, something called butter chicken, which, considering she liked both butter and chicken, she felt couldn't be bad.

The food was given to her in a small, weighty box, and she took it outside to sit on the tucked-away patio she saw out the window. The chicken was covered in a thick orangish sauce and served with a piece of flat, marbled bread and white rice. The first bite of chicken burned her tongue, but piling a bite of it plus rice on top of the bread, drizzled with a green mint sauce,

cooled the chicken so that she could taste the spices—unfamiliar flavors, equal parts warm and creamy and sharp and fresh. She ate until her stomach was too full and sopped every bit of sauce off the sides of her dish with the bread before tossing the box in the nearest trash can, which felt wrong in itself, to throw something away. But seeing the other patrons do the same, unmoved by the barely 18-year-old skinny thing stuffing her face with chicken, she followed them and moved on, with her belly full and her head rushed with the endorphins of a good meal.

It didn't take much longer for her to realize she had no idea where she was going. Ruth had given her a map of places to go in town, but the map was securely locked on her stupid tablet. She could ask someone, sure, but that meant breaking out of her precious anonymity and having someone notice her accent, which was so much flatter than the voices of nearly everyone on the Moon. So she wandered. She was adept at wandering, always had been. It's what took them to the mall, after all, for the first time, which really led to all of this.

God, I miss him. She wondered if he'd eaten butter chicken, or if he'd wandered through the streets like this.

Then twenty minutes passed. A half hour. By an hour, Miracle's aimless wandering had shifted to nervous searching. When had she turned? Could she get back home? Was she anywhere near a tech shop? The dome began to raise its shields, and the streets slowly but surely became darker. She'd been amazed at the adaption to the Moon's nonexistent day-night cycle when she first arrived, watching the dome close every night and waking up early in the morning to see the top of it crack like an egg for sunlight to spill in; being out in it, however, having no idea where she was, put a damper on her enthusiasm. She passed what seemed like thousands of people, all pushing past each other and the restaurants and storefronts for things Mira could barely comprehend. Cars passed, some zipping overhead and some trundling slowly on the road

that bisected the sidewalk. The dome was nearly shut, and multicolored lights turned on above her, disorienting in their vibrant shades. Mira's heart beat staccato, and she made herself as small as possible as more and more people left their homes for meals or nightlife.

Then, up ahead, on a tiny swinging sign, she found it: not what she was looking for, but, perhaps, what she needed.

A bell rang lightly as she pushed open the door, revealing a store small enough to match the sign. Maybe it wasn't actually small, she observed—maybe the clutter made it seem so. Tables were pushed tightly together, with barely space between them, and shelves were so tall and spindly that a light breeze might push them over. Squat chairs were scattered around, made of faded, reddish cloth. Everything looked worn, like everything in Canaan had, lacking that sterile newness Mira had endlessly encountered on the Moon: the chairs, the chipped wooden tables, the threadbare red-and-grey rug under her feet, the lamps dangling above with burnt out bulbs. The books, rough-edged and soft-skinned, piled on top of tables and shelves with no semblance of order.

“*Oh.*” Mira felt an unsteadiness in her feet, not brought on by her previously building anxiety. She half-sat, half-collapsed onto the floor and held her knees.

This was so much more than the bookstore in the mall.

A woman stuck her head out from behind a bookshelf, curious at first, but then her face—a beautiful one, Mira noted—fell into concern. “Hey, uh—are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Mira said, but her voice came out as barely a squeak.

“Uh-huh.” The woman stepped out further from the bookshop and hooked the books under her arm. “Sure about that?”

Yes, she thought. This is the best place I've ever seen.

No, she thought. I'm lost and I'm alone and I'm not sure what I should be doing.

Mira shrugged. "I've been—" she pulled out her tablet and held it up. "This is locked, and I can't figure out how to get it open. I've been looking for a technology... place for ages, and then—"

The woman laughed. "Look, usually you'd be S-O-L coming here for *tech* repair, but you're lucky I'm visiting my friend." She held out her hand for the tablet. "I've got a shop just down the block. Fix shit. This'll take me two seconds, flat."

"Really?"

"Yep." The woman smiled sideways. "Just this once, I'll do it free of charge."

Mira stood up and wordlessly handed her tablet over, and the woman got right to work, her finger sliding over the screen quickly but pointedly. Every stroke with her long digit had purpose, and Mira was strangely entranced. She should peruse the shelves, or at least make a show of it; maybe it was her smooth motion, or maybe it was the scent of incense and old paper in the air, but Mira couldn't pull her eyes from the woman before her.

She couldn't be much older than Mira, though she was easily a foot taller. Her hair was black and swished down to her chin, but was shaved on the sides to a buzz shorter than Mira's growing-out haircut. Intricate designs were shaved into it—like wires, or angular flowers. Her narrow, light brown eyes popped from a sharp slash of eyeliner, and her lips were painted a deep purple that matched her short fingernails.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Mira," she said.

"I'm Hestia. Hestia Li."

“Is your friend here?” Mira asked. “The one who owns the shop.” As far as she could tell, there wasn’t another person in the shop; and considering how packed and cramped it was, she didn’t think someone could easily hide.

Hestia chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’m not robbing them blind or anything. They’re somewhere in the back. Probably doing fuckin’ tarot or something.” She swiped one last finger decisively and nodded. “All right, fixed!”

“Are there any messages?” The words fell out of her mouth like coins—jangly and jumbled, and lacking in control. *Please let there be messages.*

Hestia crooked an eyebrow and made a few quick swipes on the screen. “Doesn’t look like it.”

No messages. Not one. No Jonas. He hadn’t looked for her. She felt a clawing in her lungs and a stopping in her throat. *I’m gonna be alone.*

“What do you want your passcode to be?”

“Passcode?” Mira managed to say. She pushed down her terror. *Save that for later, stupid.*

Hestia looked up. “So that’s why your tablet got locked to hell.” She held the screen up and pointed at the numbers. “You use a code to get in—6 numbers or so.”

Mira’s face flushed hot. That’s what the numbers Ruth gave her were for. *Idiot.* “Right, duh.” She held out her hand for the tablet. “Thanks for getting in. I can pay you, seriously.”

Hestia’s face shifted from confusion to a smirk, and the tablet dangled in her hand. “You’re an Earthling, aren’t you?”

“No I’m not,” Mira said, too quickly.

She raised an eyebrow. “I’ve lived here my whole life. I’ve met enough people from there to recognize the combination of technological illiteracy, that accent, and the air of religious trauma about you.”

“Air of—”

“You’re all so tiny, too.” Hestia held her hand over Mira’s head. “Travel-sized, I guess.”

“Yeah, they told me it was the chronic malnutrition,” Mira said hotly. “Can you give me my tablet so I can leave, now?”

Hestia’s grinning mouth opened wide for, undoubtedly, another comment that would set her teeth on edge, but the jangle of a beaded curtain and another voice cut her off. “Hestia, stop bullying the poor thing.”

“I’m not bullying, Oz. I just jailbroke her tablet—”

“You *know* what you’re doing.” A person—Oz, Mira assumed—stepped out from behind a bookshelf, and Mira had never been more confused by a person’s appearance. Tall and broad-shouldered, with a flat chest underneath a dark green sweater, but her face was covered in bright, sparkly makeup. Her? His? Looking at the coiled lavender hair tied up into a topsy-turvy bun and the long, sparkly nails, Mira assumed Oz was a woman—but a strange one. She was fat, as well, and Mira found herself envying the roundness of her face and the *swooshing* sound her thighs made as they rubbed together. She didn’t even seem to match herself, let alone the aesthetic of the bookstore: half of her was ramshackle and soft, like the bookstore, while the other half was bright and disorienting as the neon signs outside.

She shooed Hestia away and pulled the tablet from her hands, which Hestia released with a shake of her head. She held it out to Mira. “Here you are, sweetheart.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” She took it and folded it up in her pocket.

Oz raised an eyebrow. “Not a ma’am, but I appreciate the thanks. I’m Oz.”

Not a ma’am?

“She’s an Earthling,” Hestia said. “Looks fresh off the Caravan.”

“I’m not *fresh*—”

“Nothing wrong with not being from here,” Oz said. “Just... means you might have a few things to learn. Do you like books?”

Mira nodded. “I do.”

Oz pursed his (*his? not a ma’am?*) lips. “Good. Heard they didn’t let you have them down there.”

“They didn’t,” Mira said, honestly. As much as Hestia was annoying her, there was no point in lying. “I found some in a mall.”

“What, on a Jesus Camp field trip?”

“No, when me and my best friend snuck in.” Mira said, a touch of affronted pride creeping into her voice. “Broke the rules.”

Hestia crossed her arms and leaned against one of the rickety shelves. “Good,” she said, and Mira realized she spoke sincerely. “You want some more friends to break rules with?”

Oz rolled his eyes. “I’m sure you’ve done a great job of endearing yourself to her.”

“I—uh,” Mira said. “Maybe? I don’t—know anyone. Or anything.”

Hestia shrugged. “You know me now.”

“We just *met*, and half the time you’ve insulted me!”

Hestia opened her mouth to speak, but Oz cut her off. “Sweetheart. I can tell a little lost sheep when I see one, and I know you know what I mean by that. And I can tell by that look in

your eye that you like books, and you like us. Or at least the idea of us. How much have you left that little box of an apartment you must have since you've been here?"

Mira looked at the floor and shrugged.

"You're a person. And people need people." Oz lowered into one of the cushy chairs and crossed his feet at the ankles. "I'm closing in an hour, and no one's probably gonna come in this late. We can talk. What's on your mind?"

Jonas. Canaan. Caleb. Ruth. How I'm disappointing everyone. How I'm alone. How I might never see him again. How Caleb must be so confused. How Mom must cry. How looking at Hestia made me feel the opposite of kissing Jonas in the mall. How I might just die here in a few months, with nothing to do and no one to even notice. How I might never have a garden and get my knuckles in dirt again. How I'm alone, how I wake up alone, how I'm always alone.

Mira shrugged. "Lots of shit."

Oz raised an eyebrow. "I get it. You can talk when you want to. For now, you can listen to the two of us chat. You'll feel better."

Oz gestured to a chair, and Mira considered leaving the shop and never coming back. But instead, she settled into the offered chair, feeling the leather crack under her bottom, and she listened.

Ozymandias, which Mira soon learned was both the name of the bookstore and of its owner, soon became the place Mira spent most of her time. When she wasn't aimlessly wandering, it wasn't a far shot from her apartment, and the shop was so quiet always that Mira often wondered how it remained open. She'd show up sometime in the afternoon and wander the shelves, reading whatever book caught her eye: picture books, classic literature, falling-apart

cheap paperbacks—even romance novels, though the sexual scenes still caught her off guard, and more often than not she skipped over them. Sometimes Oz would drop in behind her and pull a book from a shelf and tell her to read it, and Mira always found herself either entertained or deeply confused.

Then came the evening, when Oz would lock the doors and Hestia would come over, and the three of them would talk. Hestia and Oz would usually drink an alcohol that Mira was always drawn to, fruity-smelling and amber-colored, but she stuck with Oz's offered tea. Neither of them got drunk, but it relaxed Hestia and softened her tongue. She'd end up sitting in a position that couldn't be comfortable, laughing loose and cozy with her drained cup hanging by her finger, and Mira would try not to stare.

Mira had always loved learning. When she was little, it was the Bible stories and the doctrine and how to grow green beans; when she got older, it was everything she dragged from the water-damaged pages of the mall's books. Sitting in *Ozymandias*, she learned things she'd never had the ability or courage to touch on: about sex, about gender, about the world she'd been shuttered out of.

Oz, it turned out, was neither a woman nor a man: nonbinary, which was a new word that Mira rolled around on her tongue along with their pronouns and the hiss of their name. Mira never learned what they were born as, after that hesitant question caused Hestia to shoot her a raised eyebrow, but she found she didn't quite care. They were *queer*, too—not a new word, but a new application. Sometimes Oz would invite another person over for their nighttime hangs: man, woman, neither, both, it didn't matter. But when Hestia and Mira would leave for the night, Oz would take that person upstairs to their apartment, and Mira would try not to blush too hard.

It made Mira slightly uncomfortable—their strange gender, their casual sexuality—but if it made them happy, she supposed it was worth it.

For herself, she decided she must be *asexual*, after reading about in one of Oz’s books. Asexual: someone who has no sexual desires or feelings. Asexuals, she read, could also be repulsed by sexuality, which, thinking back to her nausea after kissing Jonas, made sense. She kept it from Oz and Hestia, though—not because she thought they would judge, but because it felt nice to hold something of her own to herself, like a little seed in the dirt of her chest.

After a month, when they dragged the fact that Mira would have to actually rent her apartment in a few months, Oz offered her a job. The pay wasn’t amazing, but she got to shelve books and sweep floors and tend the potted plants scattered all over the shop, and it was enough for her to start looking at smaller, cheaper apartments to live in once her Caravan support ran out.

Hestia remained more of an enigma. While Oz would regale them with stories or whatever commentary was in their mind, Hestia was more likely to sit there silently, responding mostly with short quips or an expression that said everything. When it came to Oz’s education of Mira, Hestia mostly jumped in to poke fun or explain some tech-y thing to her that went over her head no matter what kindergarten terms Hestia used.

They didn’t make Mira talk about Canaan. They knew she’d grown up there and that she’d left. Eventually, when her constant searching for Jonas on the internet yielded nothing, she told them about Jonas, largely to get Hestia’s reluctant assistance.

“Were you two lovers?” Hestia asked around the stylus held between her teeth.

“No,” Mira said. “Definitely not. We kissed once, to test it out, and we both hated it.”

Hestia plucked the stylus out of her mouth and smiled sideways at Mira. “Are you gay?”

Shit, what does gay mean again? She wracked her brain through the books she read and Oz's conversations. "I don't... think so?"

Hestia leaned back in her chair and propped her feet up on the desk. "Okay, guess I'm coaching you through a sexuality crisis now."

"I'm not having a crisis."

"Sure you're not. Because everyone answers if they're gay by saying 'I don't know.'"

"It's not like I'm sitting here agonizing," Mira said. "Did you find anything? About Jonas?"

Hestia kicked her feet off the desk and lost the teasing note in her face. "No. I really am sorry. I can't find any record of him after he left Armstrong, which he did... a year ago? About?"

"So no idea."

"He could be in some boondock Moontown, or he could be literally anywhere else in the solar system."

"Nothing about—"

"Nothing for his mom, either, Mira." Hestia folded up the tablet and passed it over with an apologetic expression Mira wanted her to not have. "Are you... okay?"

She wasn't, but that was normal. As Hestia delivered the news, she couldn't even be disappointed anymore. She'd been on the Moon, in Armstrong, for 8 months. No word from Jonas. No indicator he even existed.

"I'm okay."

Hestia looked at her like she didn't believe her. "I can keep looking—"

"It's *fine*."

Ruth's office was clearly meant to be cozy. She sat behind a desk covered in small plants and scattered papers, and Mira sat on a low-to-the-ground couch that she could lay on if she'd wanted to. She didn't, instead sitting awkwardly leaned back, trying to feign comfort she didn't feel.

Ruth shuffled the papers in her hand with a smile. "So, Miracle—I see you've got a job! How exciting! How do you like it?"

"It's good. I, uh. Get to read a lot."

"Good, good. So that is one thing you have *definitely* checked off—great job!" She set the papers down and met Mira's eye. "What about your interpersonal relationships?"

"Also good. I have a few friends. One of them is my boss, but they were my friend first, so I think it counts?"

"It's good to be friends with coworkers, I think," Ruth said. "And I'm glad you've made friends. You're getting out of the house?"

"Yeah." Mira's leg began to shake; she put pressure on it to stop it, but she only barely slowed it down. "Everything's good."

"Fabulous. It's always a relief to find someone adjusting to their new life. I knew you would, being so young, but—"

"Are you sure you can't find him?" The words came out, and Ruth's face grew stony, but Mira couldn't stop. "Because I've been looking for him for *months* and my friend Hestia did, too, and she's really good with tech, and it's like he doesn't even exist—"

"That is the point, Miracle."

A hollow grew in her chest. "What?"

Ruth steepled her fingers beneath her chin. “When people we rescue leave our system, we make it so they are difficult to find. They won’t show up in any database. It’s—

“For safety,” Mira spat. “I know.”

“If Jonas—or *anyone else*—were in a bad situation, we would not want them to be locatable where we cannot protect them.” Ruth’s tone grew shorter. “We take great responsibility for those we save, and that continues even after they are out of our system.”

“So you just pretend he doesn’t exist?”

“Miracle—”

“*Stop* calling me that.”

“*Mira.*” Everything about her was placating; her softened tone, her banal face, even the pastel colors she wore and the stupid plants on her desk. Mira seethed. “I can promise you that Jonas is safe, and Jonas is happy.”

“And that I’ll never see him again.”

Ruth sighed. “Jonas can, at any time, choose to leave our protection. Whenever that occurs, you will be able to find him.”

“Does he know that?”

“*Yes, Mira.* We are not in the business of keeping secrets or hiding from you. We *took* you from that. We are not going to put you into that same situation with different people. I was going to tell you about the protection plan as soon as this year was up.” She smiled, not unkindly. “I see now that that was a mistake. I’m sorry I made you so upset.”

Her anger neither deflated nor exploded; it popped, like the poof of pollen that comes when biting into a ripe cattail. She emptied, and she leaned against the couch without tension. *I’ll find him, someday*, she thought in a rush. “Thank you for explaining. I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for. Now, tell me about these friends of yours.”

“Let’s go out tonight.” Hestia was sprawled in her chair like always, half of her drink already downed, and Oz leaned half-asleep against their partner of the night—one who’d showed up a few times now, a short woman named Audrey who always laughed a little too loud.

“Pass.” Oz wrapped their fingers in Audrey’s hair, and she giggled.

Hestia groaned. “C’mon, I wanna *dance*.”

“Take the Earthling,” Oz said, gesturing blindly to where they thought Mira was.

“Shut up.” Mira turned the page of her book (about growing plants in zero-gravity; dense, but deeply interesting), only half-listening.

She felt a nudge on her knee. “You wanna go out?”

“Like where?”

“Club. Dancing.”

“I’ve never been.” Mira shut her book. “Is it fun?”

“Yes,” Hestia said, as Oz simultaneously said, “No.”

“Mixed signals here,” Mira said.

Hestia spun to sit upright and, to Mira’s surprise, grasp Mira’s knee. “Seriously, it’s fun. Like nothing you’ve experienced. Weren’t you talking about new experiences?” Her eyes were wide and smiling, and her hand squeezed Mira’s knee, and she knew she’d say yes before she opened her mouth.

An hour later, they stood under the neon-glowing sign reading *Parallax*, feeling the bassy music already beat through their bones. They’d stopped by Hestia’s apartment, and she’d dug out club-going clothes for Mira to wear: what was supposed to be a mini skirt that nearly reached her

knees if she didn't hoist it up to her breastband and a sheer, long-sleeved red top that Hestia graciously provided a tank top to go under. Hestia put on her own outfit of a skin-hugging black dress with strategic cutouts on her hips and over her chest and back. Mira, unable to take her eyes away, wondered how she remembered which holes were for the arms and which weren't. After she'd dressed, Hestia sat Mira down and carefully applied makeup: smooth gold sparkles onto her cheekbones, a swoosh of black liner atop gold eyeshadow, and deep purple lipstick that, after spreading it cautiously over Mira's lips, she used to paint her own. Mira hardly breathed through the whole process, feeling Hestia's breath on her cheek and the pads of her fingers smoothing makeup onto her skin, at once pressuring and gentle. Hestia, to her credit, didn't acknowledge it, but what she did say was worse.

“You look gorgeous.” Her thumb, free of any makeup to apply, curved along Mira's cheek, and Mira was frozen staring into her eyes. *If I look anything like her, I must.*

“If I can say so myself.” Hestia smacked Mira's cheek with a playful *one-two*, and Mira, finding herself again, rolled her eyes.

The club's exterior was lit in bright blues and purples, illuminating the whole dingy street in the thrumming colors. A line of people dressed in even skimpier and more elaborate clothes than the two of them wore curved around the block, but Hestia led them right up to the black-clad, burly man at the front. “Hey, Axel,” she said.

“What's up, Hez? Got a new friend?”

“Yep. Not for you.”

Axel held up his wide hands in mock surrender. “Not my plan.” He smiled sideways at Mira—a slightly sleazy, wide-toothed one that made the back of her neck itch. “Unless you're interested—”

A smack as Hestia punched his arm. “Stop it, and let us in, or I’m talkin’ straight to your mom.”

“Jesus *Christ*.” A hologram popped on his hand and he made a few swipes before the glimmering blue door disappeared and he waved them in.

“You okay?” Hestia touched the small of Mira’s back.

Mira nodded.

“Okay, good.” She pulled her into an alcove just passed the door. The music was louder, inside, and she could feel the music as well as she could feel Hestia’s touch remaining on her back. “A few tips for club-going. Don’t take drinks from *anybody*, and if you set your drink down it’s dead to you. If someone offers you ‘candy,’ don’t take it, because it’s not candy. If you wanna go home with someone, for the love of everything please tell me so I don’t think you got murdered. And most importantly—” She playfully two-tapped Mira’s bottom. “Have *fun*.”

I’m not sure how, she thought, but she followed Hestia into the throng of the club.

The room was simultaneously too small and too massive. The back of the club seemed improbably far away, but the number of people crushed onto the floor left little space for navigation. Each wall was painted black and covered in splashes of glowing paint and curved over by thin tubes of gleaming neon in rainbow shades. Near the back stood a person dressed in coordinating bright shades, directing the silvery speakers zipping unsuspected near the ceiling with their extended arms. In the middle of the room stood a massive glass tube where people floated around, freed, it appeared, from gravity. Two women were kissing inside of it, and Mira turned away as Hestia pulled her around the edge of the crowd.

The music shifted from a thrumming beat in Mira’s body to a nearly unbearable cacophony on the dance floor. Hestia’s mouth moved, but Mira heard nothing, so she put on a

smile and nodded. Other voices shouted, but they blurred into the music. The two of them began to move and shift and dance along the floor, staying close together but untouched. Hestia moved her hips in time with the slapping beat and tossed her head back with her eyes shut and her mouth open into the slightest smile. Mira tried to follow, knowing there was no way she moved half as easily or beautifully as Hestia did. She tried to enjoy herself, to feel the free joy Hestia clearly felt as she grinned at Mira and spun on her heel, as her hand found Mira's hip and pulled her closer. She tried to adapt to the music, to find the tune among the clashing, bone-shaking music, but found herself only missing the quiet, mis-tuned piano played in the church or the rough-repaired guitars played at the picnics. She shut her eyes, and she pictured her parents dancing, arm in arm, to the off-key voice of Irene Walters singing on the makeshift stage. They looked at Mira, smiling, before her father opened his mouth and all that came out was the cacophony surrounding her.

She opened her eyes as her heart leapt to her tonsils. Her hand lurched out and grasped Hestia's arm as her head grew airy and light. Her eyes fell to the ground, but she felt Hestia's gaze on her anyway as she felt her warm hand curve around her back to her hip, and she felt her other hand curl onto the back and side of her neck as she quickly led Mira to a side door.

The silence of the cool night was bliss, as was the rasp of Hestia's voice as she guided Mira to sit on the concrete curb. "Hey, it's okay. It's quiet out here. Breathe for me."

Mira took a few ragged breaths and gripped Hestia's arm. Hestia lowered herself down next to her and wrapped her other arm around Mira's shoulder, pressing the sides of their hips together. Hestia whispered words that she couldn't hear through the *loud* still pumping through it, from her father's gaping mouth.

“... three, four, five, six, seven, eight, hold now one, two, three, four...” Hestia’s voice was thin and warbly, like she spoke through water.

Breathing, she thought. *I’m supposed to breathe.*

She breathed along with Hestia’s instructions and found the noise in her head fading to the still-present, gentle thump coming from the club behind them. Hestia’s arms were still wrapped around her, she noticed. She was warm. “I’m okay,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“No apology allowed.” Hestia pulled her arms away and, seemingly unconsciously, pushed a bit of Mira’s grown-out top of her hair back off of her forehead.

“I am, though. You were having fun.”

“They were playing shit music anyway.”

“You’re lying.”

Hestia shook her head. “So? You looked like you were gonna pass out in there.”

“So I’m sorry—”

“And I don’t care. I’m multifaceted, Mira. I can find fun wherever the fuck I find myself.”

Mira felt herself smile. “Multifaceted.”

“Yep.” Her purple lips stretched into a wide grin. “Wanna find a quieter place?”

She showed Mira to a bar not far down the road; surprisingly empty, considering it was a Friday night and the road was crowded, but Mira didn’t argue when they sat at a table in a relatively quiet corner of the dimly-lit bar. Hestia got drinks from the bar—something light and fruity for Mira, with only a small amount of alcohol, and something brown with an orange peel in it for herself. They sat in silence for a few minutes, each enjoying their drinks, before Hestia broke it.

“What if we play a game? 20 questions. Or however many questions we do ‘till we get bored.”

“How’s it work?”

“We literally just ask each other questions. One after another. Gotta tell the truth.”

Mira shrugged. “Okay. You first?”

“What’s your favorite color?”

“Green,” she said instantly. “Like fresh leaves. What’s yours?”

“Nope, can’t ask the same question.” Her face was serious, chiding, but her tone was the teasing one Mira had gotten used to, the one that Oz explained was how she talked to people she actually liked.

“That’s a dumb rule.”

“Tough shit.”

“Did you know that guy back there?” Mira asked. “The bouncer guy you threatened.”

Hestia rolled her eyes. “Unfortunately. Good ol’ *Herschel*.”

Mira choked on her drink. “Thought his name was Axel.”

“He *calls* himself Axel. We’ve known each other since we were kids. My parents would meet with his parents here to sell shit in the back.”

Mira’s brow furrowed. “Sell shit? Did they not have your shop?”

Hestia blinked for a moment. “*Oh*, right. You don’t know.” She leaned her elbows on the table. “You know the skeezy area of the city? By the docks?”

“Vaguely?” Ruth had gestured towards it, warning Mira away from it, when they’d first toured, and Mira hadn’t had any reason to go across the majority of the city just to explore it.

“Lots of illegal stuff gets sold there. You want someone dead? You want drugs? Fake passports? Hacks? You can find it there. My parents used to run shit. Mostly illegal tech that would sic viruses on everything you own. They went everywhere, shipping stuff out, and I was just in tow in the back of their ship.”

“So you got to see everywhere?” Mira said.

Hestia laughed into her drink. “If you count the shittiest sides of every station ‘everywhere,’ then sure.” There was a noticeable line of bitterness in her tone.

“Where are they now?” Mira said cautiously.

“No idea,” she said. “They ditched me here when I was 10 with their friend Arthur Chatterjee. Wasn’t worth shit as a father figure, but he left me his shop when he died, so…”

Hestia shrugged and knocked back the remainder of her drink. “They’re in jail, I think. Haven’t seen ‘em since, and don’t care to.”

“Not at all?”

“Nope. No reason to linger in the past when all it did was hurt me.”

“Oh.”

Hestia shrugged. “Maybe you should give it a shot. Get your head out of the past.”

“I’m not stuck in my past.”

“Bullshit.” Hestia leaned onto the table and locked her eyes on Mira’s. “Do you go *any* day without thinking about them? Wondering what they’re doing, how they’re feeling?”

“No, but—”

“They *hurt* you. Mira.” Hestia said. Any teasing was gone from her voice, and her eyes were flinty. “They hurt you so much that all you could do was run. You are better without them, and you are better if you stop *worrying* about them.” She grasped Mira’s wrist, lining her thumb

along the thin bone in her arm—the bone that was, still, too prominent even after nearly a year of regular meals. “That includes your friend Jonas.”

Mira’s head grew hot, and she tore her wrist from Hestia’s grip. “No it doesn’t.”

“You’re *obsessed* with him—”

“He’s the *only* person I could rely on.”

“And he left. And he’s gone.”

“And he’ll come back—”

“Will he? Or are you just leaving behind any fucking chance you have for happiness in favor of some *man*?”

“He’s not just *some*—”

“Are you sure you’re not in love with him?”

“Yes!” They were getting too loud, Mira knows; the murmurs of background conversations have quieted, but Mira can’t bring herself to care, so caught up in the throes of the argument. Suddenly, this is cathartic. This is a fight she’s needed. “I don’t like men!”

“Do you want to go back to Earth?”

“No.”

“Are you happy here?”

“Yes.”

“Then what are you holding onto?”

“I don’t know!” Mira leaned forward on the table and held her head in her hands.

Silence fell between them. Murmured conversations began again, and Mira was comforted by the clink of glasses together behind the bar. The vinyl of the booth shifted and creaked under Hestia’s weight as she scooted to sit beside Mira.

“I didn’t mean to yell.”

“Well,” Mira said. “You did.”

“I’m sorry. I won’t yell again.”

A density grew between them: a taut, fizzing thing that Mira could not name. It wasn’t the tension she usually felt after a fight; she wanted to be closer to Hestia, not farther. When Hestia’s thigh brushed against Mira’s and stayed there, she did not pull away. When Mira’s hand, unconsciously, slipped around to Hestia’s back and touched the bare back peeking from her dress’s cut-out, she didn’t pull away. When Hestia looked at her, her eyes wide and dark, her mouth slightly open like she could taste whatever was between them, Mira wondered if her lips were as soft as they looked.

“Can I kiss you?” Hestia’s voice was so low it was barely audible, so resonant Mira felt it in her throat like she spoke it herself. She nodded.

The kiss was nothing like her kiss with Jonas. That was nothing but a press of lips together, confused and obligated. This was a motion that felt natural as breath, moving lips together in the soft and hot and wet of each other’s mouths. This was the electric she’d seen in her parents’ eyes when they danced; this was what she’d so desperately sought. Hestia gripped the back of her neck and kissed her deeper, and Mira finally understood why this was a sin: if she could have done this back in Canaan, she’d have never worshipped at anything but the lips of a lover.

Lesbian. Another new word, and another thing for Mira to grasp onto. She rolled the word around in her mouth like a piece of candy, swirling the sibilant to the *buh*, the *ee* to the

roof-mouthed *n*. Hestia could tie a cherry stem into a knot with her tongue, and Mira would just watch and kiss the stem and the tart juice from her lips.

Oz laughed, when Mira told them the morning after their night at the bar. “You didn’t know you liked women?”

“Wasn’t exactly an available career path.”

“It is here.”

Her year’s anniversary passed with little note. Oz gave her the day off work, and Hestia took her on a date to an anti-gravity bar, where Mira got her first taste of floating and found she loved it. Weightless, buffeted by the massive fans, she felt like dandelion pollen suspended in the breeze. Hestia kissed her, floating face-to-face with Mira rather than Hestia hovering a head above her, and Mira felt even more weightless. When she floated high enough in the glass tube to see, over the moon’s horizon, the Earth suspended brown-and-blue among the black sky, she did not think of Canaan. She thought only of Hestia, laughing below her.

There was nothing from Jonas. She’d had some vague fantasy tying her together that as soon as she left the Caravan’s protection he’d be on her doorstep, or ringing in her mindlink, or pinging on her tablet. Weeks passed from that year’s mark. Then months. Then years. Hestia showed her how to search for him herself after a few months, and for a time Mira input his name every day, sending out pings for *Jonas Prior, Jonas Michael Prior, Jonas Michael, Marianne Prior, Jonas, Jonas, Jonas*—

Mira had lived on the Moon for two years when she gave up. Hestia called it moving on; Ruth, in their bimonthly chats, said it was healthy. “Now you can imagine whatever you want of him,” she said, her mouth stretching into an attempt at a comforting smile.

“He might be dead,” Hestia said, bluntly, as Mira laid silently on their bed, gazing at the screen of her tablet listing hundreds of Jonases that weren’t hers. “Or he might just not care. Whichever it is, he doesn’t matter.”

“He doesn’t matter,” Mira repeated.

Hestia laid down against her back and wrapped her arms around Mira’s stomach, squeezed. “You gotta get out of the past, love. It’s choking you.”

Mira dreamed she was choking. Her grandfather leaned over her in their garden, shoveling soil over her. The dirt collected in the corners of her eyes, the holes in her ears, her nostrils, her mouth she couldn’t seem to close. Her grandfather smiled, and dirt fell out of his open mouth as his skin sloughed away to bone. Jonas buried her in crumpled pages he methodically tore from books. The pages cut her skin and her throat as he shoved a handful of clippings into her mouth, and she bled and cried in equal measure. Her stomach filled with pages, but she was still hungry—*so* hungry. She lay trapped, covered in a blind layer of paper until, she knew, she starved. Father McCade was simple: he just walked up to her, said, “It’s been too long since your last confession, Miracle,” and cinched his hands around her throat until her vision faded and she woke up frozen.

She rolled over and breathed in the sharp, entirely un-Canaan smell of Hestia’s shampoo and fell back to sleep.

Mira was 23, and she was happy. She lived with Hestia and their cat, a fat one-eared thing named Tumnus, for four years in the spacious apartment above Hestia’s tech shop. She worked at Oz’s bookstore, recommending her favorites to customers every day, and dragging Tumnus across the city to lay in the patch of sunlight that collected in the window when the

Moon had its sun season. She took weekly trips to anti-grav chambers and learned aerial backflips and watched the Earth roll across her vision. She went to parades and clubs with Hestia and Oz and the other friends who collected her, and she learned to accept crowds and music and the cacophony that comes with a city. She learned the vices she'd long been denied: the burn and buzz of alcohol, the breeze of wind on her bare thighs under her short skirt, the solidity of a swear as it left her lips, the feeling of Hestia's face between her thighs and the heady rush of what came after. She built miniature gardens in their window boxes and grew berries and flowers and herbs. Fragile things, difficult to grow, because it didn't matter if the strawberries shriveled on the bush or were eaten pockmarked by creatures; she could go down the street to the market and pick up a punnet of them for pocket change.

Mira was 23, and she was haunted. Hymns were earworms she could never get out of her mind; she'd catch herself humming "Lord of the Dance" or "On Eagle's Wings" and huff before turning on the music streaming in her mindlink to drown out the tune. She'd walk past one of the Christian churches on the Moon and smell the barest whiff of incense and barely stop herself from barging into the vestibule. She spoke to Ruth and lied when she asked if Mira thought about home and ignored the look on her face that told her she knew the truth. She heard Caleb in every toddler's laugh and shoved the thought from her head, reminding herself *no, he's 5 now, he's 6, he's 8, he's 10*. She saw her mother in the women entering the bookstore with toddlers on their hips or swaying, heavy bellies. She saw Corrine Andrews, once, in the grocery store, with a ten-year-old trailing, bored, behind her and a smile on her face. Corrine was round-faced and wide-hipped, no longer the waif who jumped on the Caravan, and the child had a fullness to his cheeks and a spring in his ankles. Mira passed by them and their heaping cart, and they didn't notice her. Or, at least, they said nothing.

She saw Jonas nowhere. She couldn't bear to even imagine where he could be.

Mira was nearly 24 when a message pinged on her mindlink from an unknown register:

He left our protection. Look up J—— Prior-Mitchell. -R

Prior-Mitchell. She looked at the name on the site Hestia had shown her years ago, sitting peacefully above an address on the *Andromeda* station. A three-month journey from the Moon, and a frequent midpoint for trade ships journeying between the Moon and Mars. It looked like a nice place from the official website: an artist's haven, with a whole section of it reserved for a massive garden, an Earth-like day/night system, and simulated weather. The government highly supported its people, and it boasted the lowest rate of homelessness in the English-speaking stations.

Mira didn't quite care. *Is he married?* she wondered. *Or did his mother remarry?* She scrolled further. *No, must be him.* The address listed only him and a Taylor Prior-Mitchell, but gave no more information. Her heart sank. *Hope it wasn't forced.*

Next to his information listed a number to send a message to his tablet. If she pressed the button, she could contact him now. Her finger hovered over it.

Jonas, it's me, she pictured herself saying. *Why didn't you look for me?*

She wrote down the address, having never worked out quite how to copy something to her mindlink, and stuck the bit of paper in her tablet before folding it over itself and sticking it in her pocket.

Oz was unpacking a new crate of books in the main room. They'd been excited this morning when they came, because they were all antiques. "From Earth, some of them are," Oz had said with absolute awe in their voice. Oz was particularly interested in Earthen books; they'd

begged Mira for the four books she'd taken from the mall more than once over the last five years, but Mira always gently denied them. Never mind she had every page of them memorized by this point. They were hers.

Were, being the operative word. They sat heavy in her knapsack at her feet as Mira decided her course of action. Should she leave the books in a careful pile on Oz's desk at the end of the night? Leave a note saying that she quits, but maybe she'll come back, that it's not Oz or Hestia or anyone but Mira herself that's making her leave? There was no Caravan to scoop her up before anyone saw her leave, but there was the ship she'd signed to work as a gardener on leaving tomorrow, the one aptly named the *St. Louis*, which only made Mira think of home and its half-fallen Arch more. Or should she fess up—go find Oz, help them unpack their books and *ooh* and *ah* over the worn pages and faded ink, and tell them she was leaving.

Would she do the same to Hestia? Leave in the morning, extricating herself from Hestia's koala arms, grabbing the bags she can and leaving a note on the bedside table? Or see her tonight, and tell her she was leaving, and that it wasn't her, and that she was sorry she couldn't leave everything behind.

The first option was easy, and what she was used to; the second was kinder, and all the more impossible.

A clean break, Mira thought. *I should do a clean break*. But what would a clean break involve here? When Oz or Hestia could call her mindlink or message her tablet as soon as she left? Sure, the link and tablet wouldn't work in deep space, but Hestia could track her if she wanted to. She'd gleefully demonstrated the tech to Mira months back. With Canaan, there were no surprises, and no loose ends. Her parents couldn't contact her, and Mira could stop herself imagining her mother's tearful face. She could rationalize: *They knew I was going to leave, deep*

down. They couldn't have been too hurt. For Hestia, for Oz—for *Tumnus*, the stupid cat, why did she let Hestia get a *cat*—there would be no real cutting of ties. There would be no hiding. There would be no rationalization.

Mira's stomach grew queasy. She pulled her knapsack onto her shoulder and walked from the back office to the main room. Oz sat half criss-cross on the floor, one leg tucked in and the other thrown out to the side. Teetering piles of books surround them, sorted into some configuration only Oz really knew, and their forehead was wrinkled as they focused on a massive tome on their lap.

"Earthling to Oz," Mira said.

Oz held up a finger, and Mira took that as a sign to settle in. She sat on the floor between two piles of books and leaned her back against the cushy armchair. Mira looked around the store she'd spent so many hours in—the deep red-and-brown, mismatched chairs softened by years of bottoms, the Open/Closed sign Oz painted with a portrait of Tumnus a few months back, the shelves and tables piled with books that Mira did her best to place in some semblance of organization, the smell of paper and ink and slight damp that covered the whole place, changed only by the scented candles Oz would light late in the evening. *Ozymandias* was a place of delicious chaos: intimately manageable chaos that comforted Mira more than anything else she'd discovered on the Moon.

One by one, Mira pulled out her four books from her knapsack: *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* with its small portrait of Tumnus the faun and his snowy umbrella almost entirely worn off; the pop-up book about space that no longer popped up and left a haze of glitter over any thumb that touched its pages; the heavy-bound, illustrated book of plants, which paled in comparison to the larger encyclopedias she'd found deep in the reference section; and *Much Ado*

About Nothing, which Oz had taught her about and Hestia took her on a date to see in play form two years ago. She set them in their own pile and scooted it slowly in front of Oz.

It took a few minutes for the bookshop owner to notice the pile. When they did, they set the book they read down and picked each of the mall's books up in their worn hands, turning through the pages before setting it carefully beside the others. They said nothing as they read, and Mira barely breathed.

After setting down the pop-up book, Oz rubbed the glitter into their skin and looked up at Mira with a peering expression. "You're leaving us, aren't you, sweetheart?"

"Yes," Mira said. "But it's not because of you guys—I love it here, I really do, and my job, and the store, and the Moon, and I love you guys *so much*, but—"

"You found him."

Mira let her breath escape. "I found him."

Oz's mouth turned up into a smile and they shook their head. "This isn't goodbye, silly thing. You find that boy and you bring him here, even if it's just a visit." They pulled *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* from the stack and pressed it into Mira's hands. "You said you read this one with him, right?"

Mira nodded wordlessly.

Oz tapped the cover. "Then give it to him, and make sure he gives it back to me."

Euphoria rose so quickly that all Mira could do was laugh. "You aren't upset I'm leaving?"

"Nah." Oz threw one arm around Mira's back and squeezed her against her soft side.

"This isn't really leaving. You'll find your way back here, even if you find your home someplace else."

Mira let her head fall on Oz's shoulder, shut her eyes, and let herself imagine that Oz was right.

Oz kicked her out when the faux sun set. Mira always loved watching it: the "sun" when they were in the Moon's dark season was a series of brightly glowing lights all over the dome, dispersed somehow so it looked like a wide glow as opposed to individual lights. The "sunset" took place when the lights shut off row by row, slowly dimming the city into darkness lighted by streetlamps and the faintly blue-lit Earth. Mira walked through the bustling streets, expertly avoiding passersby without looking anywhere but up, watching as the lights fade to darkness on the last Moon sunset she was certain she'd see.

Streetlamps glinted off the mirror of Hestia's shop, so Mira couldn't see inside. She didn't need to see to know where Hestia would be: behind the shop counter, her ankles kicked up on the ancient modem she swore she was going to fix one day, a pen held between her teeth as she frowned over accounting files that she insisted be physical. Mira could go in there, make her a cup of tea, wrap her arms around her tense shoulders, and tell her nothing. They could fall into bed in a few hours, and Mira could wake up early and sneak out; Hestia would never know, with how she slept. Maybe she could ask her to go with her, and Hestia and Jonas could meet, and—

The bell dinged as Mira entered. "Hey, love." She wasn't in her normal position. *Mustn't have had much business today*, Mira rationalized.

"Lock the door and flip the sign?" Her voice came from their upstairs apartment, tense and flat, but Mira tried not to read into it. Tension could come from anywhere. After setting the lock and marking the store as closed, Mira quickly made her way up.

Hestia was leaned back on the kitchen counter, one hand holding a steaming cup of tea as the other propped herself up. A hologram buzzed in front of her, generated from the miniscule holoprojector a few feet away. The whole room was lit a cool, whirring blue from it, making navy shadows on places there shouldn't be, like Hestia's unreachable face. Mira's stomach fell as she recognized the website and the names on the hologram.

"Hestia—" She reached an arm out to her, to touch her straining wrist or grab her hand or rub the tightness out of her curving shoulders. Touching Hestia had grown easy as breathing, as easy as prayer had been when she was small and full of simple belief.

"Don't." Hestia's head snapped towards her, and Mira let her hand fall limply to her side.

"How did you know?" Mira said quietly.

"I look, periodically. Guess I got lucky, looking today. You already had the fucking search queued up on the server."

"I thought you stopped looking for him."

"I thought you had, too." Hestia slammed her tea on the counter with a jarring *clink* and snatched up the holoprojector. The shadows lengthened, and Mira could barely see Hestia's moving shape as she sat roughly on the couch. "You're leaving, right? Going back to that shit I thought you left behind."

Mira flicked on the nearest lamp and regretted it as soon as she saw the anger on Hestia's face: vitriolic, her eyes hot and her mouth a flat, unyielding line. "Jonas isn't *that shit*—"

"How is he not? He's the only person you ever fucking mention."

"He's the only person I can bear to think about."

"And you think he thinks about you?"

"Yes!" Mira said. *He has to.*

“Look at you.” Hestia gestured sharply. “You’re a fucking kicked puppy, going after what hurt you ‘cause he gave you treats once.”

“I’m not.”

“Have you even contacted him? Or are you just gonna show up on his fucking doorstep and hope he takes you in?”

“He will.”

“You’re too trusting.”

“And you’re hateful.” Mira crossed the room in a few long strides to stand above Hestia. “You think the worst of everyone you haven’t personally vetted.”

“I read the situation.” Hestia leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest, crooking an elbow. “And I make my own decisions.”

“Well, I do too. And I’m going.” As if to prove her point, Mira stomped to their room and threw wads of clothes into the first bag she saw. *There are plenty of hotels by the dock*, she thought. *I don’t need to stay here. Not with her.*

She wished Hestia could hear her thoughts, that she would grow angry and stomp in here and kiss her and tell her she couldn’t leave without her. But Hestia stayed silent, and Mira felt one inch from exploding. There was no Father McCade this time, showing up on her doorstep to evangelize her out of leaving. There was no Caleb crying at the door, no father’s silence, no mother’s quiet begging. There was just Hestia, sitting stonily, stubbornly quiet as Mira prepared to leave everything behind yet again.

Packing was easy. She had almost no personal items, since she’d moved into Hestia’s already-decorated apartment, and any books she read she simply took from *Ozymandias* and returned them after she read. Any pictures she had were on her mindlink or her tablet. So she

packed clothes into one small suitcase, folding them carefully after her initial outburst. She stuffed some toiletries in her knapsack alongside the jostling paperback and threw in the passport they'd gotten a year ago on the off chance the two of them could vacation. When she was about to zip her suitcase, Tumnus crawled his fat, grey-speckled body on top of her clothes, and Mira scritchd him around the ears as he leaned into her palm.

“Can’t take you with me, buddy.” He opened one yellow eye and bit at her palm.

“Asshole.”

She scooped him off her suitcase and buried her face into his fur, breathing him in for a moment before he squirmed out of her grasp and landed with a small, graceful thump on the floor. Mira worried the inside of her cheek. *Okay. Okay.* She hefted up the suitcase and walked through the living room to the front door. She set it down and turned toward Hestia, who sat on the couch still with her knees pulled up to her chin, sweet-looking.

“I’m going now,” Mira said. Her voice seemed too loud for the small room. “Anything you want to say, out with it.”

“I just—” Hestia sighed sharply. “I hope I’m wrong and you’re right.”

Mira laughed bitterly. “Sure. Like you’ve ever liked being wrong.”

Hestia’s shoulders lifted in a stiff half-shrug. “I don’t wish bad on you, love. I’m not vindictive. I just—”

“Think I’m making a mistake.”

“Yeah.”

They sat in silence for a heavy moment, and words swarmed like bees on Mira’s tongue, trying to push past her lips and escape: *Come with me. Don’t make me be alone. Come meet him. He’ll love you. I love you. Love me.*

“Bye,” she said, instead, and turned the handle of the door.

“Bye.”

The *St. Louis* was a ratty ship, and her crew matched it. The hull had likely once been shiny, but it was scored by various coats of scratched, atmosphere-burnt paint, and her windows were covered in a layer of grime that also covered most of her crew. But the captain, a squat black woman named Gallagher, swore it flew better than anything else she'd touched, and she had an honest face.

Plus, they hired her with no questions asked beyond “You know how to garden?” so it was her best (and possibly only) option on such short notice. Ko, the medic, an overly chipper, gap-toothed woman with cracked-lensed glasses, dragged her down the cramped but well-maintained hallways to a small room with an even smaller cot in it. The room stank of disuse, but everything functioned, so Mira just smiled at the woman and thanked her, mostly to send her away, but Ko stayed there, bouncing on her heels, until Mira set down her bags, insisting she needed to see the garden.

“We’re all terrible at gardening,” Ko said. “Since our last crewmate left, I’m afraid it’s all gone to shit. But I think you can salvage it!” She beamed, and Mira made herself smile back.

“And we’ve got some seeds if it’s gone real bad.”

Mira’s mind flashed to dry, cracking soil, to withered green beans, to her grandfather’s hands in the dirt. “I’m sure I’ve seen worse.”

The greenhouse was manageable. A few dead flowers that were annuals and would have died anyway, a near-croaking tomato plant, and an overabundance of mint and dandelions. But

manageable. The dirt was still damp and the sunlamp warmed her face, and Mira felt what felt like years of tension melt from her bones.

“Think I’ll do some work here now,” Mira said. Half her words came out choked, so she cleared her throat. “It’s a bit cramped, so do you mind...?”

“Absolutely! Sorry!” Ko said, and she bustled out the door with an energy that seemed to exude from her pores. Before Mira could breathe, she stuck her head back in. “We’ll be leaving in half an hour or so. Once we’re out in space, let Onyago know if you want to do a spacewalk! It’s stupid fun, and we’ve got a spare EVA suit for you.”

“I’ll be sure to let you know.”

Mira did not work on the garden. Instead, she shut the door, knelt in the grass, and sobbed as quietly as she could. When she was sated, she chewed a few mint leaves and laid on the grass until she felt the ship rumble and croak beneath her. There was a miniscule porthole in the greenhouse, mostly hidden by the overgrown mint bush, but a few snips from clippers she dug from the toolbox allowed her to gaze out the window at the slowly disappearing Moon beneath her, until it disappeared into stars and impassable darkness.

Interlude: Revelation

Mira's eyes flash open. "EVA suits."

Bex chirrup mechanically. **We have six EVA suits, fully prepped with oxygen tanks.**

"How much oxygen is in the tanks?" Mira sits up and shoves her feet in her shoes, her mind whirring to a dizzying degree. "How many hours?"

Each tank, fully fueled, contains 4 hours of air.

Mira pushes out of her room and, bouncing against the walls as her eyes cartwheel, trips down the winding halls to the airlock where the suits are kept. "Are they fully fueled?"

I do not know exactly, but—

"Can't you check the records?"

But I can check the records, is what I was about to say. Beckett, it appears you are experiencing vertigo. You should sit until—

"Not until I know for sure." Feeling bile rise to her throat, Mira plasters her forehead against the cool metal wall of the hallway and breathes harshly through her nose.

Know what?

Mira swallows the gathering saliva and scrunches her eyes shut. "I don't want to die, Bex. I don't want to die. I want to see Jonas, and Hestia, and Oz, and my parents and Caleb if they'll let me. And if there's oxygen in those fucking tanks, I want to know if it'll be enough to get me to *Andromeda*."

It's as true as it is confusing: as soon as Mira opened her eyes, all the resignation towards her death evaporated. Her desire to live is clawing up in her like a desperate animal running away from the butcher's knife. She's not sure what's changed. But something has, irrevocably.

Bex says nothing. The nausea passes as Mira's breath slows, and Mira pushes herself off the wall. "Well?"

I am glad that you want to live.

Part Four: Miracle

The valves in the EVA suits are easy to release; a quick turn, and Mira's ears are met with the harsh hiss that means a future—probably.

“You're sure you can't be certain how much was used?” Mira asks.

I can work out what suits were used and for what amount of time, but I cannot say how much each individual breathed while in the suit. My calculations are exact as they can be: at maximum 20 hours of air, at minimum 14.

Mira stuck her head in front of one of the nozzles releasing air; it blew the edges of her hair and went coolly up her nose in a pleasant way. “How many hours of air did I need to make it to Andromeda?”

17 extra hours.

Mira sighs. “So I'll need to get lucky.” *You'll need a miracle, Miracle*, Jonas says in her head, teasingly. Mira shuts her eyes, as tears prick the edges.

Your odds of survival are at 38.237%.

Mira thinks back to Canaan—to the sickness, the starvation, the children dying easier than anyone else. To her stomach aching, always, and her wrists as thin as twigs. To catching cicadas in nets and gnawing on tree bark. To summers so hot she sweat more than she could ever drink and to winters so cold her water froze in her cup. “I've made it with worse odds.”

Time passes with jarring normalcy. Mira gardens, out of habit. Digging her hands in the earth, she can close her eyes and imagine her grandfather is beside her. The green beans are flourishing, and she plucks one off the vine and bites into it, enjoying its snap and the green, woody taste of it. She rewatches movies Hestia helped her save on her mindlink, closing her eyes

and letting the scenes play out. She reads books the crew left behind: fantasy in Ko's collection, comic books in Onyago's, romances in Gallagher's. Volkov's were all in Russian, and Ronan's were historical fiction she avoided, but the other books gave her enough. She reads *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* again, and wonders for the first time how the children felt when they grew up in Narnia, only to be forced back into children's bodies on Earth.

She eats more than her rations allow and has dessert after every meal. By the end of each day, her stomach hurts in that on-the-edge-of-pleasant, too-full way she is so unused to. She checks the communications and the oxygenator, just for fun, just to see if the communications figured out how to work without the escape pod and if the oxygenator decided to kick on again. They did not.

She talks with Bex; though she cannot make much conversation, hearing even the approximation of a human voice is a balm, especially in the disturbing silence of the ship. Mira takes to slamming doors and stomping around the ship just to hear some kind of noise, and she exhausts every album downloaded on her mindlink and the crew's abandoned tech within the first two days.

Two days from *Andromeda*, she sits in her bunk, reading a novel, when Bex's face pops up on the screen embedded in the wall. **Beckett, I am curious.**

"Didn't know that was in your code." Mira shuts her book and sticks it under her thigh. "What's up?"

I am curious if your opinion has changed in regards to farewell messages. As stated before you cut me off at my first suggestion, both those recovering the files and myself would have the capability to transmit the proper files to their designated audience even lacking explicitly dedicated technology. While I do not wish your death, farewell messages

could be kept and distributed upon possible death or deleted, to your will, should you survive. Naturally, I suggest—

“No,” Mira says.

Bex gives a displeased beep. **Are you certain?**

Mira can almost hear what the AI is thinking—*I thought you’ve accepted your past, Beckett, and that you understood people care about you.* “Different reason than before, Bex.”

What reason is that?

“If I record farewell messages? Makes it seem like I think I’m gonna die.” Mira shrugs. “It’s asking a little too much of the universe, honestly, to give it that free ticket for my immortal soul and ask it to let me go.”

Understood, Bex says, in a too-chipper tone that means she definitely does not understand.

Mira laughs for what feels like the first time in months. Really laughs, so hard her head feels dizzy and her stomach aches. For a few moments, it’s like she’s on the dingy, paper-covered floor of the mall bookstore again, with Jonas just a handhold away.

The laugh turns into a cough. She tries to ignore what that means.

“Do you always meddle this much in your passengers’ lives, Bex?”

Yes, Bex says. **Volkov says it is a flaw in my code. She says it with a smile, however, so I do not know if she says it in jest or if I am actually technologically flawed.** Bex pauses and speaks with a more stilted rhythm. **If you would like me to be less... meddlesome, I can reduce my involvement in your affairs. I have done it before—Ronan was particularly not a fan.**

“Nah,” Mira says. She can’t fully believe she’s apologizing to a robot, or that she is having a conversation with a robot, or that she cares about this robot’s feelings created by nothing by microchips and whatever other technobabble Hestia would ramble about. “You’re annoying, but I like it.”

I am not sure if that is a compliment or an insult.

“It’s a compliment, you stupid robot.”

When she wakes up the next morning, three hours from *Andromeda*, the air feels thin. Sharp and cutting, like winter air in Canaan, where breathing was possible but seemed like a bad idea. Each breath makes her heart skip. *Where am I?* She reaches an arm out and feels the metal edge of her cot, entirely unlike the wooden frame of her childhood bed. *Right.*

“Bex,” she croaks. Raw from sleep? From lack of air? “Bex, oxygen levels.”

I cannot tell you exact levels. The oxygen meter is a part of the oxygenator and is similarly nonfunctional.

“I thought you said you knew how long I had.” She blinks, blearily. *No, that’s not right.*

I have told you, most of my calculations have been based on estimates. Her voice imitates sadness, and Mira’s temper spikes.

She kicks off her blanket and sits up with a swing. “So, what? No exact hour’s calculation?”

My ability to calculate hours left became impossible with the release of the EVA air tanks. Lacking the exact number—

“I get it.” Her head hurts. “Fuck. What can I do?”

Bex goes silent, and Mira can almost hear the ones and zeroes working out what to say.

We can monitor your symptoms.

“What are they?”

Common symptoms of hypoxia include confusion, headache, shortness of breath and difficulty breathing, blue-tinged extremities, loss of darkvision and color vision, euphoria, and eventual unconsciousness.

“Cool,” Mira says. “Sounds fun.” Compulsively, she looks at her fingers, but sees them pink and pale like they always are.

You appear to exhibit some confusion. Can you report any other symptoms?

“Breathing hurts,” she says. “Got a headache.” She weaves her not-blue fingers together and squeezes. “Am I gonna die? For sure?”

I cannot say. The calculation is impossible.

Mira sits in silence on the edge of her cot. Tears prick at her eyes, but she knows she can’t cry—sobbing would take too much air, limiting her chances even more.

Jonas, she thinks. Fuck.

You will use less oxygen if you are warm, Bex says. You should rest in the greenhouse. The temperature is an average of fifteen degrees higher than the rest of the *St. Louis*.

“I don’t—” Mira shuts her eyes, struggling to get the thoughts rumbling in her head to bounce out of her mouth. “I want to eat first. There are things I want to eat.”

Beckett, it is best to limit movement and talking to reduce your oxygen—

“I’m not dying on an empty fucking stomach.”

Bex is silent. **At least consider eating in the greenhouse.**

Mira looks at the room around her: a bare room she never allowed herself to decorate. Metal walls, metal floor broken only by a flat, rough rug by the built-in sink. The yellow light flickering above her, slightly buzzing. She closes her eyes and thinks of grass, green-and-brown, and growing things, of dandelions under her nose. “Nowhere else I’d rather be.”

She pulls green beans off the stalks and a tomato from the vine and eats the tomato raw while sautéing the green beans in butter and garlic pulled from the fridge. She plucks dandelions she let grow and wilts down the leaves while popping the buds in her mouth whole. She microwaves a premade meal of butter chicken and rice and eats everything together, relishing the uncommon shifts in flavors from the spicy chicken to the bitter greens to the sweet, buttery green beans. The cupboard lacked naan, so she pulls a hunk off a half-stale baguette Onyago had baked and soaks up every bit of food from her plate, the liquid butter and sauce sopping messily into the bread. Her stomach is full, and her head feels pleasantly heavy.

Everything seems dimmer—the colors lessening, the shadows deepening. “Vision’s affected,” she says. She takes a heavy swig of cold water and crunches down on the stray piece of ice that floats on her tongue. She swallows down the snow and takes another drink to swish around her mouth, the cold lending a pleasure-pain shock to her muddled mind.

Beckett, you should go to the greenhouse.

“Don’t worry, my fingers aren’t blue yet.” *I don’t think*, her mind provides, and a laugh nearly bubbles out of her. “I can’t really tell.” She scrabbles on the couch and finds her book, frowning at the dullness of Tumnus’s red scarf.

Beckett—

“I’m going, *mother*.” She walks toward the greenhouse, weirdly proud she still walks straight when everything in her head feels wobbly and her limbs feel heavy. “Like Mom would ever be here.”

Bex opens the door when Mira gets close. “Thanks.”

You are welcome.

Mira sits on the grass and leans her head against the ivy-covered wall. The door hisses shut, and Mira shuts her eyes and tilts her head upward towards the light. Bex was right—it’s warmer in here, pleasantly. The faux sun’s heat brushes her face, and the heaviness in her limbs dissipates like dye dripped into water. “I’m photosynthesizing,” she says. She laughs, and the laugh is loud in her ears. She winces. “Sorry, Bex.”

It is okay. I cannot perceive sound the way you do.

“Jonas always said I was too loud,” Mira says. “Grandpa said I just liked to be heard halfway across a field.”

Her stomach drops. “Bex, I don’t wanna die.”

Death isn’t the end, my Miracle. Her mother’s voice. You’ll see Grandpa again, and all your little siblings. And me, ‘cause I won’t let you go before I’m there to hug you.

There are hands in her hair, braiding it. *No*, she thinks, dully, *my hair is short now*. She shakes her head to remove the feeling.

I am going to divert all the oxygen in the ship to this room.

“Why do you sound sad?” Mira says. “Can you feel sad?”

It seems I can. It must be another flaw in my code.

“You’re sad I’m dying,” she says.

You still may survive. I calculate your odds to be 12.86 percent.

“I’m glad you’re sad I’m dying.” Mira lays on her back in the grass, and smiles when a blade tickles her ear. “Do you think my mom is right? Oz likes to talk about reincarnation. Maybe they’re right.”

There are many possibilities for a human afterlife. I can tell you about them, if you wish.

Mira shakes her head. “Nah. I wanna be surprised.” The light above her is too bright, and too square. Not the sun. Not really. She shuts her eyes, and she coughs. She aches. She’s tired.

“Can you put me in a memory?”

Of course. Just think of what you want to see, and I will put you there.

Mira spreads out her fingers in the grass, twirling a blade between her fingers.

Catalysis will begin in three, two, one...

The heaviness leaves her body, the pain leaves her lungs, and the warmth on her face only intensifies.

She opens her eyes. She sits upright on a familiar hill. The grass is brown and crackly under her hands, and she’s torn up so many handfuls that her hands are covered in a thin layer of dirt. The river glitters before her, and ducks float beside the cattails.

“You think ducks know about space?” Mira says. “You think they remember people leaving, or do they think we’re just some weird aliens?”

“I don’t think ducks think that deep,” Jonas says. She looks to her side to see him: 16, small-boned, patchy-bearded. “They’re probably just confused we aren’t ducks.”

“The world should belong to ducks.”

“And so the Lord said, let there be ducks, and let ducks rule the earth,” Jonas says, putting on a breathy, big-voiced mimicry of Father McCade.

“And he looked down at the ducks and saw that they were good.”

Jonas laughs and shakes his head, looking down at the ground. “Stupid.”

“The ducks take offense at that.”

They fall into silence—comfortable, easy, normal. Mira lays in her back on the grass and looks up at the blue sky above. Faint lights blink above her, a dozen or so space stations unfathomably far away. The Caravan is coming tomorrow to take them away. “What do you want to do first, in space?” she asks.

Jonas lays down beside her. The sides of their hips touch; the weather is still too warm for that, really, but the proximity is comfortable. “I want glasses, and I want to read a book.”

“That’s all? You don’t wanna float or do a spacewalk?”

“I mean, all that, too,” he says. He turns his head to the side and smiles wide. “But I really want to see, and I want to read.”

“What book?”

“Whatever’s the nearest thing to me.”

“Doesn’t even have to be a cool space book?”

“I’ll read the *Bible* if that’s what they’ve got.”

Mira nudges his shoulder. “At least read the cool parts, like the murder bits in the Old Testament.”

“What about you?” He nudges her back. “If you could do anything first in space, what do you wanna do?”

“Float.”

“Besides that.”

Cut my hair. Eat a meal I didn't grow. Cry. Watch you read a book on your own. Figure out what stars look like up close. Lay in grass, just like this, with ducks below and you beside me.

“Anything,” she says. “I’ll take anything.”

She shuts her eyes, and Jonas takes her hand, and she drifts in the sun-soaked air of Earth.

The BEX-2819 artificial intelligence is a master of odds calculation, but a calculation’s validity is only determined by the information known by its calculator. Lacking any oxygen meter, all Bex could use to calculate was the amount of oxygen within the oxygenator’s tank and the smaller tanks of the dispelled EVA suits. Bex did not factor in the greenhouse and its inhabitants, nor their natural oxygen that would care for Miracle Beckett as she cared for them.

The *St. Louis* docks in the wide, bustling port of the *Andromeda* station, and Bex immediately blasts a distress warning as soon as her coms connect to *Andromeda*’s system and opens every door wide as soon as the dock’s wide doors are airlocked. Within minutes, dock-stationed medics rush into the ship as a hover-ambulance is summoned, and Miracle Beckett is pulled from the ship, blue-tinged and wheezing even in her unconscious state. By the time she reaches the hospital, her extremities have pinked and her breath comes steadily through her oxygen mask. Bex, static in her ship, fusses.

In the hospital, a young nurse is told that the ship he has been waiting for has docked, and its awaited inhabitant is coming to him. He smiles and waits at the emergency room door, looking for the ambulance through his perfectly-matched prescription glasses.

When Mira wakes up, she thinks she is still locked in a memory. A hot hand grips hers, and she is warm, and the ceiling above her is sky blue. Then she feels the plastic in her nostrils and sees the skinny tube extending out of her wrist, and she knows it is not a memory.

“Mir.” The voice is like a cover of a song—simultaneously familiar and alien. The notes are the same, but the tone is different. The smile in his voice is all-too familiar, as is the feeling of his hand in hers. *This can't be real.*

She turns her head to her side and sees him: broad-shouldered, his hair longer and caught into meticulous locs, his beard no longer patchy, square glasses perched on his nose, and tears running out of his unchanged brown eyes. “Jonas,” she says, like a prayer.

Leaning forward to pull him into an embrace is instinctual, but she is caught in hospital tubes and barely reaches a sitting position before Jonas wraps himself around her, leaning his body over hers like he had when they'd kissed so many years before. This time, he just buries his face in her neck and makes choking sounds; she doesn't work out if he laughs or cries until she feels tears soak through her hospital gown. She sheds no tears, instead just holding him and letting him hold her as they fold into each other like no time has passed and they are sixteen again, in a field, talking about ducks and space and novels.

“What the *hell* did you do, Mira Beckett,” he says when they eventually separate.

“Oh, so it's my fault that the assholes who hired me ditched me?” She says it teasingly, but annoyance spikes.

“No, but it's firmly in character that this even happened.” He shakes his head. “Only you would take a normal cross-space trip and end up a freakin' news story.”

“Well, only you would make it fucking impossible for me to find you!”

Jonas sobers. “I'm... so, so sorry. I wish I had a good explanation.”

“I’ll take what you’ve got,” Mira says. She attempts to cross her arms indignantly, but her IV gets caught in her oxygen tube, and she ends up pulling it half out of her nose. “I... I thought you abandoned me.”

He grimaces. “Yeah, I got told as much.” He carefully helps untangle the tubes and adjusts the cannula back in her nose. “Mom... took a while to really leave Canaan. She was sure someone was gonna come up here and find us and drag us back. So we never left the Caravan’s protection.”

“You could’ve on your own,” Mira says. “You were grown.”

“And it would’ve stressed her to death.” He shakes his head. “She died a few months back, so I finally left.”

She takes his hand and squeezes it. “I’m sorry.”

Jonas shrugs. “In the grand scheme of things, it wasn’t a bad death. Her heart just gave out one night while she was asleep. Doctor said she didn’t even know it was happening.”

“Good.” They fall into silence, Jonas rubbing his thumb over Mira’s knuckles. “Why didn’t you look for me?” she blurts out. “I looked for you so many times.”

“Lack of faith.”

“What?”

He pulls his hand away and fiddles with the edge of one of his locs. “I looked for you in the Caravan’s protectorate two years after I left, when you should’ve come. And I didn’t see you, so I thought you’d decided to stay, or you’d died, or...” he tosses his hands up helplessly. “You weren’t with them, and I couldn’t think of where you could be, because you couldn’t have left their protectorate that soon, and—”

Mira laughs. “Jonas, I lied.”

“You lied?”

“I came a year after you did. I told them I was 18, and I left early enough that no one could tell them the truth. And then I left their protection so you could find me.”

Jonas gapes. “Oh.”

Mira falls back on her pillows. “So you’re telling me that, essentially, if I had been more patient or you’d thought to look me up normally once, we could’ve worked this out sooner.”

“...yeah.”

“We’re so dumb.”

“We really are.” Jonas smiles at her, and Mira feels like she is in sunlight again. She scoots over to the far side of the bed and pats the sheets.

“Jump in.”

Jonas carefully climbs into bed beside her, and Mira puts her arm around him. She listens to him breathe, marveling. “So, how’d you know I was coming?”

“A woman named Hestia Li.”

Mira stiffens. “What.”

“She sent me a message months ago. Told me you were coming and that she thought you were an idiot, but she didn’t want you showing up without notice.”

“How polite of her.”

Jonas looks at her—slightly up, his forehead gently creased and his eyes curious. “Who is she, Mir?”

Oh God he doesn’t know I’m gay, oh God. “She’s—uh. A friend.”

Tell him.

What if he hates me?

“A friend?”

He’s not gonna hate you.

“My ex. She’s my ex,” Mira says. “She broke up with me when I left to come here. Which is mostly why I’m surprised she told you.”

Jonas’s mouth turns up imperceptibly. *He has a wife, she thinks. What if he hates me?* She tries to read him, but her scrabbling mind can’t tell if he looks displeased, or disgusted, or upset, or—

“God, everything makes so much sense.” He runs his hands over his eyes and ruches himself to a sitting position. “Seriously, holy shit, everything makes sense.” He struggles his tablet out of his pocket, flicks it open, and snaps a hologram to float above it:

Jonas, kissing the cheek of a man, whose arm is casually, intimately slung around his waist. “This is my husband,” Jonas says. “His name is Taylor, and he’s as gay as I am.”

Mira throws her arms around Jonas, hearing his tablet clatter to the floor, but she doesn’t care. She cries onto his shoulder and squeezes him tighter as he rocks her. “I love you so much,” she says. Euphoria rushes over her like the falling feeling when she’s half asleep, and all she can do is laugh and cry in equal measure.

Recovery comes quickly. Any damage she suffered from her time with low-level oxygen (though, thankfully—“Miraculously,” Jonas said, and Mira smacked him—she was never in an anoxic space) was repaired within three days by an IV cocktail threaded into her vein. Her time in the hospital largely consisted of conversations with Jonas and nurses prodding at her when her voice grew tired. In bits and pieces, they shared each other’s lives apart.

Jonas and his mother lived on the Moon for a year, in the same apartment building Mira moved into not long after they left. They moved to *Andromeda* mostly, he said, because his mother liked looking at the pictures of the park in the brochures. So they'd rented a small apartment, and Jonas started working as a secretary in the hospital to support them when his mother became afraid to leave the house.

"She could go down to the mailbox and nowhere else without getting a panic attack," Jonas explained. "It was... difficult."

He started nursing school not long after, juggling his job and his classes with only minor missteps. The technology of the classes was difficult to grasp, but he figured out the practical aspects of nursing fast enough to pass and snag a job at the same hospital in the infant ward within a few years.

"You did it," Mira said, finally recognizing the blue shirt and pants he wore as scrubs. "You actually did it."

"It was possible, here," Jonas said. "You wouldn't believe how few childbirths go poorly."

His mother finally left their apartment when she saw a church down the road and decided she needed to attend their Christmas service. Jonas was reticent to step into a church but knew he couldn't let his mother go alone. So he put on his nicest clothes and guided her down the street to the squat, lit-up church.

"She fell in love," he said. "And, eventually, I did, too."

Mira felt her heart sink, at that. "What?"

"Not like that. Bear with me?"

The church had a tiny congregation, and the pastor was a gentle man named Sam Mitchell. He had a wife and three kids, one of whom was a twenty-something gay man named Taylor. “I’d worked out I’d liked boys for a while,” Jonas said. “But I finally *got it* with him.”

Mira liked Taylor. As soon as she was discharged from the hospital, Jonas broke no argument and took her immediately to their home: a cozy, third-floor apartment five minutes from the hospital. Mira entered the house to be immediately wrapped into a hug by a tall, soft-bellied man with a bright orange beard and a wide smile peeking out. “You must be Mira,” he said.

“You must be Taylor,” Mira said, though her face was smushed into his chest.

He set aside a room for her and made a whole spread of breakfast foods for her to try, and the three of them talked for hours with Mira unable to remove a smile from her face.

“Their church is a good place,” Jonas said, in Mira’s hospital room.

“Sure it is.”

“It is, I promise. I’m still not part of it, but Taylor is, and…” Jonas shrugged. “It’s welcoming, actually welcoming, and they don’t care who you are or what you do as long as you treat people kindly. It’s everything we thought it was when we were little.”

Mira believes him, even more so when she meets Taylor’s father, a grey-haired, deep-voiced pastor, who hugged her the same as Taylor and treated her kindly even when it takes all of her self-control to only be cold to him, not cruel. She grows warmer to Taylor’s father over time, but he is always good to her—fatherly, even, which hurts her both more and less than she thought it would. She’s fully taken into the family, at everyone’s insistence, and among the rush of Taylor’s nieces and nephews and the smell of baking bread, she finds something close to what

she'd seen in the holograms all those years ago: a family, gathering, full-bellied and complicated and happy.

She never goes to the church, however; that is too much. She does walk outside it sometimes, looking at the candles burning and the smelling the tinge of incense that wafts out the door.

Bex is overjoyed when Mira returns to the *St. Louis* the day after she's discharged. Mira steps into the airlock, and Bex immediately chimes in with a hurried, shocked-sounding **Beckett!**
You are alive!

"Yeah, I am, you silly robot."

I am glad to hear this. And your recovery is proceeding normally?

Mira gives the AI the rundown of everything, and Bex's joyful beeps at her recounting of Jonas make Mira laugh. She packs up her meager possessions, taking specific care to locate her book from where she abandoned it on the floor of the greenhouse in her delirium. When she hoists her bag onto her back, Bex beeps disappointedly.

I assume this means you are leaving, and we will not speak again.

Mira grimaces. "Probably not. Your crew will be back soon, and I can't exactly have a normal conversation with them again."

I understand.

Mira's heart twists more than she would've thought possible for a robot. "You're a good one, Bex. Don't get those flaws in your code fixed."

That would be foolish to attempt at this point; my system is far too old to fully connect with any modern coding technology.

Mira laughs softly and pats the metal wall. "Good to know."

Be well, Miracle Beckett.

Mira swallows to clear the lump in her throat. “You too, Bex.”

A week later, she gets a deposit into her bank account for the salary she took for the job, plus a few extra thousand. There is a note:

Seriously sorry about all this shit. Glad you're alive. Bex wouldn't talk to me unless I paid you more, so enjoy. —Cpt. Raika Gallagher.

Hestia calls her, once. Just an audio call, no video, which Mira is grateful for. “Hey, Earthling.” Her casual tone is forced, but Mira mimics it.

“Hey, Hez.”

“Your boy told me you made it.”

“Yeah, barely. Worst driver I’ve ever had.”

Hestia laughs sharply. “Yeah, I don’t think you can beat that. So, you’re... okay?”

“Well, I don’t want to try oxygen deprivation anytime soon, but—”

“Seriously. Please.”

“I’m fine. I wasn’t, but I’m okay. I almost died, and that fucked me up. But I’m okay.”

“Good.” The line falls silent.

“What about you? And Oz?”

“I’m good.” The faux-casual tone is back, but it sounds slightly easier. “Oz told me to tell you to call them, or they’re going to send you a message with the entire text of the worst romance novel they can find.”

“Ew.”

“You know they’ll find something nasty.”

“Oh, guaranteed.”

They both laugh, and it's easy again. If Mira shuts her eyes, they're talking in their living room, or side by side in bed, or across a table from each other at a restaurant, their feet grazing each other under the table.

"Anyway, I just—" Hestia says, and that wall is back up. "I'm glad you're doing good. I'm... sorry, about what I said. You're right, I was being hateful, and I wasn't trusting you."

"Yeah," Mira says. "It's okay. Trust is hard, and we were never the best at talking about real shit."

"Definitely not." Hestia laughs ruefully. "I—uh. I'll let you go. I just wanted to be sure you were okay."

"Thanks." Mira starts to end the call, but stops herself. "Wait, Hez—"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you," Mira says. "For everything. I don't—I don't know what I would have done without you and Oz." Mira swallows. "I'm always gonna love you, a little bit."

"Yeah," Hestia says. "Ditto."

They both laugh and hang on the call for a few extra moments, savoring the still air and the sound of each other's laugh-soaked breaths. "Good luck, Mira," Hestia says. "Be happy, yeah?"

"Only if you are."

She tries to call Oz every week after that and manages to avoid any terrible smut sent her way. Sometimes, she barely speaks and just listens to Oz ramble about customers and their new hire and new books they brought in, and sometimes Oz reads aloud to her in the most dramatic fashion. Oz always ends the call with an invitation to Mira to visit at some point, and Mira promises she will and means it. She finds that having a promise she intends to keep feels good.

She isn't sure if it's Jonas, or *Andromeda* being so comparatively small, or the pastor, or the lack of Hestia's loud, distracting presence, or any combination of the above, but she thinks more about Canaan than she's allowed herself to for years. She sees Caleb in Taylor's youngest nephew and feels her mother in Taylor's mother's hugs. She goes to *Andromeda*'s park with Jonas and wonders what the Canaan farm fields would look like if the grass was this green.

The park is the closest thing to Eden that Mira could imagine. In the very middle of the station, there are acres of nothing but green. Ringed on the outside are farm fields, growing corn and wheat and other crops Mira can't recognize, tall and fruitful. In the next ring is a grassland with a dirt path carving through it, perfect for couples to walk or have picnics in, surrounded by swaying wild grasses and flowers. The third ring is less an official ring and more a barrier: a wide, clear creek running cheerfully, steadily between the rings, with which farmers irrigate their fields and from which the animals in the final ring drink. The innermost ring is Mira's favorite: a man-made forest filled with evergreens and hardwoods and fruit trees, weighed by heavy green leaves and rich fruit, where deer and rabbits and other small creatures roam the brush-filled roots and birds of all colors sing and flit across the topiary. While Andromedan inhabitants are only allowed into the woods on specific days, Mira goes to the grassland park and sits on the crest of a hill by the creek and listens to the sounds of nature somehow thriving in a hunk of metal in space.

She's been in *Andromeda* for a year. It's a quiet place, with quiet people, but Mira doesn't find herself bored. Pastor Mitchell—who insists she call him Sam—offers her a job as a gardener, and, though she still won't step in the church, she finds something akin to peace in manicuring the bushes by the doors, planting flowers around the walkways, and setting up a vegetable garden in the back corner by the children's playset. She arrives early Sunday mornings

to water and prune, and leaves when Sam walks up from his house and passes her a cup of coffee before unlocking the church. Occasionally, she stays and lies on the swinging bench, her legs dangling, and listens to the hymns bleed out the open windows. Jonas comes with her sometimes, and he sprawls on the grass or the swinging bench and gets in the way until she sprays a hose on him like a misbehaving cat.

It's good. Living with Jonas and Taylor has its bumps as they reacquaint and get to know each other. But minor arguments and misunderstandings lead to conversations and game nights and a straight line of cuddling on the couch, and Mira grows used to another new life.

They don't talk much about home. They'll make dark-humor jokes and tell Taylor their funnier hijinks and talk about their time spent together, but they avoid the difficult: Mira's family, the bad summers and winters, Mira's time alone. She thinks about it, though. She can't quite stop.

Then, after living in *Andromeda* for a year, she gets a call from Ruth, and considers the improbable. She sends Jonas a message: *picnic in the park, by the bridge? sunset? me and you?* She shakes until he responds, and then shakes more. *Sure*, he says. *See you then!!!*

She packs a basket of simple foods: grapes, bread, cheese, ice water in two thermoses. On her walk through the park, she grabs a few dandelions and sticks them in the basket, too. She spreads a blanket out on the grass and sits cross-legged, looking out at but not seeing the creek and the woods as her mind spirals.

The park is centered in the station, and a giant, transparent dome covers the center. Being in space, there is no consistent sun to orbit around, so the station's day-night cycle functions near-identically to the system on the moon, with the dome producing diffused light to mimic sunlight during the day and shutting off to the clear, starry expanse when night falls. By the time

Jonas comes up and sits beside her, the dome is half orange and half blue-black, melding into a strange purply-brown in the middle: an Andromedan sunset.

“So,” Jonas says, holding his knees to his chest and following Mira’s distant eyeline to the trees. “What’s got you in the mood for a picnic?”

“I have an idea,” Mira says. “I don’t think it’s a good idea, but it’s an idea I don’t think I’ll be able to shake.”

“Okay,” Jonas says. “Slightly ominous, but go ahead.”

“Ruth called me today and asked me if I’d come on the Caravan.” She turns to look at him, and is unsurprised to see him blinking, wide-eyed. She looks at her feet, bare in the grass. “I told her I’d think about it.”

“Really?” He isn’t accusatory or disappointed, or even sympathetic—he’s curious and disbelieving, like she’d told him she’d found a slug in her shoe.

“Yeah. She has an idea that ‘bringing back former Canaanites could aid the disbandment of the cult, in showing the success of one outside of its influence.’”

“Sounds clinical,” Jonas says.

“Sounds possible.”

“Maybe?”

Mira shuffles around toward him. “Think about it this way: she said that someone in Canaan, metaphorically, pushes all of their doubts and insecurities about everything on a tiny shelf in the back of their mind. Eventually, with enough shit on the shelf, the shelf breaks. Think about how our shelves broke—the sickness, the winter, the books, our breaking of cultural norms, Ruth—”

“And Corrine Andrews leaving,” Jonas supplies.

“Yes!” Mira says. “We had lots of shit on our shelves, so they eventually broke under enough strain. What if the two of us go down there, and them seeing us happy and healthy and living is enough to break their shelves?”

“The two of us?” Jonas says.

Mira flushes. “I mean, you don’t have to. But I thought, maybe...”

Jonas’s face is unreadable in the growing darkness. “You really want to save Caleb, don’t you? And your parents?”

“He’s just like us, Jonas. He’s stuck, and he might know nothing, and he’s suffering. And Mom, God—” Mira scrunches her eyes closed to keep tears from leaving. “I just want her to have a few easy years. And I just keep thinking about how they’ve probably got Caleb lining up for marriage already, and he’s just a baby, and God knows what’s happened since we left—”

She feels his warm hands cover hers. “Mira. Look at me.”

She opens her eyes to meet his: twin shades of brown, both damp and shining. “If you think you can handle leaving without them—if you think you can do this, and you want to do this, I’m with you.”

A sob-choked laugh comes out of her throat. “You’re with me?”

“Always.”

He pulls her in, and Mira thanks whatever God exists that she’s found him and she still fits so perfectly in his arms. They hold each other until the sun sets and the park falls to full dark, the lights of the surrounding city distant beyond the farm fields. They lay on the blanket beside each other, hands entwined, gazing up at the stars.

“It’s wild to me that the stars look the same,” Jonas says. “They’re identical. Even the constellations—just at a different angle. I always thought they’d be bigger up close.”

Mira shuts her eyes and revels at the stars still dancing on her eyelids—tiny pinpricks, swirling above her, unreasonably bright in the night’s darkness. “I thought the same thing.”

Jonas squeezes her hand. “Some things never change.”

She opens her eyes. “Do you have a book saved in your mindlink?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Read to me?”

Jonas laughs. “Is this payback for all the times in the mall?”

“Maybe so.”

He shoves her shoulder, and she shoves him back, and they laugh until their stomachs hurt and constellations explode behind Mira’s eyes. She slides his arm under her head and holds his hand to her chest and listens to him read, memorizing every word and intonation and the vibration of the words in his lungs. She shuts her eyes and smells dandelions, and Miracle Beckett remembers.

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