

ADRASTEIA: A NOVEL

by

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ABSTRACT

EMMA S. LYNCH. *Adrastea: A Novel*. (Under the direction of BRYN CHANCELLOR, M.F.A)

Adrastea is a science-fiction novel that follows Adrastea on her journey from the moon to Earth in a misguided quest to find her sister. Set several thousand years in the future, after the Earth has been destroyed by climate change, this is a science-fiction novel. Adrastea joins a group of rebels, the reclamationists, who are the crew of the spaceship *Enetai*, and joins the fight against an oligarchic government to regain control over Earth. Both Adrastea and her sister, Annika, have entered a stage of post-humanism, as their body has been combined with exoterrestrial DNA, in order to increase their life expectancies and abilities. This procedure has had unforeseen effects on the sisters' physical wellbeing and changes how Adra perceives the world. With the help of the crew of the *Enetai*, including several exoterrestrials, Adrastea reunites with her sister and reassesses her position of wealth and power. This novel discusses found family, earth justice, and ethical wealth under an oligarchic and capitalistic system.

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DEDICATION

To Johanna, Tony, and Emmett, for being my first readers since forever.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Adrastea: A Novel

My creative thesis is the first half of a science-fiction novel, *Adrastea*, about 25,000 words in length, narrated in present tense by a first-person limited narrator, Adrastea Ierde. The novel takes place in the speculative future, long after the climate destruction of Earth and the contact of humans with aliens. The core of the story focuses on found family, finding oneself after trauma, and the beauty and sanctity of Earth. The novel also looks at the ramifications of allowing a government to control the majority of the wealth in the event of a climate disaster, and how corporate influences on the government results in a continual production of wealth that disenfranchises the majority of citizens in a way that is insidious and easily ignored by the middle and upper classes.

The main setting is on a spaceship called the *Enetai*, which is crewed by a group of characters who aid Adrastea post-trauma, and help her discover who she is becoming. The *Enetai* is a smuggler ship that transports goods between rebellious, “reclamationists” colonies who are working to restore Earth’s climate and rectify the power and wealth imbalance that shapes their society. The ship is captained by the human Hanna Lessels, and crewed by medic and human Dr. Jack Garland; mechanic and exoterrestrial Dys(monias); navigator and exoterrestrial Tethys; and cowboy and human cook Heck Tae. The crew of the *Enetai* acts as a found family for Adrastea as she grapples with acknowledging the destruction her family is responsible for and with the loss of the family structure that she grew up with.

A secondary setting is Earth, on a homestead set up post-apocalypse. This setting acts as a place of healing and reinforces the unlearning of so-called truths that Adra has believed her whole life. Life on the moon is manicured and manufactured, and once Adrastea is exposed to the tumultuous and beautiful life on Earth, she realizes that she was taught selected information in order to keep her complacent and under control. The primary piece of information that Adrastea unlearns is about the causes of climate collapse—Adra has been taught that Earth's atmosphere collapsed naturally, and not as a result of human interference. The deferring of blame for the destruction of Earth is something that has shaped Adrastea's understanding of Earth and her own government.

Adrastea begins the novel running from an unknown danger, and she is shot unexpectedly upon reaching the *Enetai*. When she wakes up, she cannot remember the week leading up to her arrival on the ship; she believes she is trying to save her beloved older sister, Annika, who rebelled against their mother. The crew suspects that Adra is a double agent, working to betray their movement of reestablishing civilian control over the Earth and freedom for those imprisoned in mining colonies, because the crew knows that Adrastea is the daughter of a powerful politician. The crew is not necessarily incorrect: Adra's mother is the Governor over the colony "et Lunum," or on the moon, where all billionaires fled during the collapse of the Earth's environment centuries earlier.

As the novel continues, Adra remembers her role as a revolutionary, where she used her mother's resources to push back against the government. She lies to the crew to protect a family secret—her mother's illegal experimentation with exoterrestrial genetic material to prolong her daughters' lives, a practice abhorred by the xenophobic wealth and deadly to exoterrestrial. The crew of the *Enetai* help Adra, for personal and dogmatic reasons, and their help becomes more

and more necessary as Adra's own perception of time becomes twisted and her narration becomes disjointed. The majority of the novel lies in Adra discovering who she is becoming as a result of her family's secrecy and manipulation, and all that her family lied about and destroyed to maintain oligarchic power.

It is important to the narrative that Adrastea dies in the opening pages, although it is a brutal and miserable way to open any story that I want to ultimately be about hope and reclamation of our planet. I want Adra to experience a complete and total break from her former life, and her former position as inheritor of the wealth of the solar system. As a participant in an oligarchical system, and the beneficiary of twenty thousand plus years of exploited labor and resources, of decimated families and corporatism, I believe her death and reconfiguration is symbolic of a greater mental change that happens within the character. In order for her position to be truly shifted, she needs to become an entirely new person with an entirely new set of demographic circumstances.

It is also important to the narrative that her "resurrection" occurs at the life of one of the life forms known as an "exoterrestrial," which are a life form that is beyond what humans can comprehend. Because of human society's unwillingness to accept exoterrestrials, and instead to exploit them and use them for parts, they are viewed as sub-human. When Adrastea comes back to life, then, not only can she no longer be a part of the bourgeois in which she was raised, but she is now sub-human, and stands completely apart from her family's legacy.

My writing process of long-form works has been in development since I was thirteen years old. Initially, I viewed long-form writing projects as a sprint. I believed I needed to get all of the words on the paper as fast as possible without interruption or hindsight. This project encouraged me to not necessarily slow down in my writing process, but to fortify myself for a

marathon. I had written an initial first draft of this novel by June 2023, and it finished at above 200 pages. Beginning the school year again, I realized that I was not as connected to the material as I would like to be, and so I began again. Dr. Chancellor allowed me to submit 150 pages of material to her as a preliminary draft, from which I was able to refine and pare down material to find these 90 pages of material to present to the committee.

This development of material, only to backtrack and step forward again with production, is a process that is completely new to me. The perpetual generation of material that the timeline of this semester has imposed has been an interesting and taxing artistic process. Choosing each scene, each paragraph and line to make sure that they are the most impactful that they can be is a process that I have not engaged in before, and I am finding it difficult to create a completely coherent tone across all chapters and sections of this work. Holding the ideas of both a close edit of details and a larger revision of the overall plot and setting has been a very challenging project. Although I am enjoying it, I know that it is a skill I have to continue to refine.

My personal aesthetic has been in development for as long as my writing process. I value character and setting over plot in my narrative, which leads to difficulties in telling long-form stories. It is important to me that my writing focuses on character over plot or “happening” within the story, which is a difficult line to tread, especially as things *must* happen within a story. It is also important to me that the setting I create feels vibrant and real. I personally connect more to narratives that prioritize character and setting, and I feel that if these aspects are stable enough within a story, that a plot will be equally stable. But, by heightening character and setting instead of plot, I know a lopsided beast can be created. It is my hope in this story that the first two are strong enough to carry the latter along.

My primary aesthetic in writing, I believe, would be image above ease of comprehension, which is not very fitting for a long-form narrative in which a reader has to keep track of a through-line. I think that I have found this aesthetic first in *The Book of the New Sun* series by Gene Wolfe, where the narrative is prioritized (ironically) over the setting and the development of character. The setting is alien and incomprehensible, set so far into the future that a reader has to pore over the text in order to gain a footing. Once a reader has attained that footing, though, the entirety of the narrative and the setting is illuminated. The tall metal towers of castles are revealed to be repurposed rocket ships, and lily-like flowers are actually the results of genetic mutation. I am fascinated by this multi-layered and meta approach to storytelling, where pieces of the story fall into place only upon close reading.

It is important to me as a writer that the reader not fully understand the landscape of Adrastea's world from the opening pages. I want readers to be intrigued enough with the concept of the novel and to be curious enough about Adrastea to want to find out more about the rules of the world. The narrator will assume that the reader has a certain knowledge of the setting which the reader will not have, putting the reader at a disadvantage when entering the story; hopefully this will encourage the audience to figure out the world. I want to whittle away as much expositional material as possible, so that a reader may feel as though they are entering an old world with new eyes. Also, through Adra's skewed way of experiencing time and reality, the narration of her life has become irrevocably knotted, which adds to the complexity of presenting a fully realized world. When writing, I find myself asking, "Is this a detail of the world that Adra would tell to the readers? Would she even find it interesting enough to mention?"

I am also transfixed by the storytelling in Tamsyn Muir's *Locked Tomb* series, in which the vibrant, complex characters are a part of and equally vibrant, complex settings. The plot in these three books is complicated intentionally, and resolved only upon multiple readings and full understanding all characters and settings. But, reading these books does not feel like work at all, and rereading them to find all of these small details and hidden plot points is an absolute joy that only increases with each re-reading. The amount of exploration that these books ask a reader to do, and the enthusiasm that the readers feel to do so, is something I aspire to create within my own readership.

I know that I cannot expect my work to elicit this great of an emotional response and dedication to understanding the narrative at this point in my career, but I am hopeful that eventually these guiding stars will lead me to a destination approaching these qualities in my novel. Although not necessarily an aesthetic, I hope to be able to create a world that is so immersive and rich that readers will want to become a part of it in the way that the above novels have invited me to become a part of them.

Important themes in my work are found family and justice, which I think also tie into my overall writing aesthetic. I enjoy writing stories that ultimately have hopeful endings, and to me, hope comes in the form of creating new communities and taking steps towards positive change that reflects change we can enact in our current lives. Close-knit characters who are able to find each other and create close bonds despite outside forces is something that is important to me in the development of a story; I find myself often using the relationships between characters to demonstrate their interiority. Warmth of the family, both found and given, is important in my writing, because the creation of community is important for individuals and is something that everyone seeks in perpetuity throughout our lives.

And, at the risk of moralizing, I believe that writing is meant to tell us something about our present situation, and I believe that we currently need to be looking at Earth justice presently, which is why I find it such an important subject to write on. Within this novel, there are three different lenses through which climate collapse is examined, and I cannot say which lens is the right way understand the precariousness of the social and political aspects of climate collapse, but I want readers to engage with all of these different perspectives in order to reflect on their own positions and thoughts about climate change and how to respond to it. Building off of this, I want to illuminate the beauty of the planet to emphasize this urgent moment.

I also want this novel to focus on ideas of dismantling the colonial institutions that pervade our society on all levels, such as the stratification of wealth along lines of racial identity. I want to make it very explicit in my novel that Adrastea's ancestors were wealthy on Earth, and were contributors to the climate collapse through their industrialization and exploitation of resources. Because of their wealth, they were the among first to leave Earth, and so they are in charge of planetary colonization; basically, they contributed to Earth's destruction and then reaped financial gain. Again, I know that a science-fiction novel written in this way cannot be a direct call-to-arms, nor should it be, but I would like readers to step back from the work questioning the implications of our current socioeconomic structure. By looking at this exaggerated projection of the future, I hope that readers will be able to, either actively or passively, draw connections to our current political environment, and will be encouraged to think more about these themes beyond the framework of a novel.

I am excited to continue production and revisions of this narrative and to learn about my writing process. I have several aims for the rest of the novel. I hope to develop stronger ties

between *Adrastea* and the crew of the *Enetai*, as well as to show how the relationship between Adra, Vassa, and Annika have changed and matured as they have grown from children into adults. I want to emphasize and further develop the three different depictions of planet justice, and encourage readers to consider their own views on climate change and the actions that they are taking as individuals. I think that as the themes develop throughout the novel, my ideas will be clearer. I am excited to move forward beyond these pages, and I hope they will be able to reach a wider audience.

I hope that *Adrastea* will not draw the reader's focus to the material workings of science fiction, as much as it will focus on Adra's struggle to reconcile with her sister's death and "resurrection"; her awareness of what it means to be sentient and loving; her acknowledgement of how her life is privileged, and how underprivileged lives are different but not below hers in worth; and the concepts of found family and a chosen home. By engaging readers in a deep and enjoyable reading process, I hope that this novel will help readers look at how climate destruction and the stratification of wealth are directly related, and how the corporate interests of governments serve only to benefit those who already hold power.

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Chapter 1.

My stomach aches. I am holding my hand across the ache, trying not to feel the blood pounding in my ears. My hand cannot spread wide enough to press the hurt into my stomach, but I cannot stop moving. I cannot stop moving. I am carrying my mother's shotgun underneath my arm, and it is awkward and hurts to hold. I don't want to leave it here.

I do not know if she is behind me. It doesn't matter if she is — she is all around me. She always has been. Red camera lights watch me from the streetlights as I pull myself down the sidewalk, past the manicured lawns that I used to play in. The night is half blue, half bright white, like most of the nights of my life, casting strange and twisting shadows at my feet.

For eighteen years, I have been my mother's daughter. I can be her no longer.

Too desperate to be wary of the cameras, I duck through a lawn and make my way to the edge of the dome, to where I know a door is hidden in the paneling. I fumble with the magnetic key in my pocket— I only need it to touch the lock and the door will open, but my hands are shaking so hard that I don't know if I'll be able to do it. My hands are slippery with a dark liquid. The gun is long and wooden in my hands, but I can't let it go, I can't leave it here. The key clatters against the lock and the door swings open.

Over the hedges, I can hear the wail of sirens, the heavy noise of Enforcers' chitinous armor crashing as they run. Faster, faster, I have to be faster. The door shuts behind me and I start into the tunnel, the lights flickering on as I approach. I have run through these tunnels before, accompanied by the heartbeat of my own footsteps, but I can't seem to do that today. I go as fast as I can, my hand still pressed into my stomach.

They should still be there. They should still be waiting for me. I blink and the tunnel swims. It is hard to tell how far I have come. She doesn't have cameras here — I cut them all out

by hand one night, after Iyleen knocked the power out. I do not feel bad about my wincing, about my falling against the walls, because she can't see how weak I am in here. The tunnels are long and concrete, and bare bulbs of concrete offer sparse lighting. The pipes that run overhead hiss steam and spit water droplets. I could find my way around here with my eyes closed, which is lucky, because I can't seem to keep them open. The long gun smacks against my knees, knocking me conscious with every step.

The port is far and I am worried I will not make it, but with my hand pressed against my stomach and the gun beneath my knees, I clatter forward until I am standing at the hanger door. Shaking even harder now, I put the key against the lock, and the door slides open to the wide-open space port cast in blue shadows.

A lone ship sits in the center of the port. It is smaller than I thought it would be, gray and stout. I hope it is the ship I'm looking for, the ship the Lieutenant said he'd send for me, but if it isn't, I'm still getting on it. One way out, no way back. Running across the hundred yards of landing zones to the lone ship I will be terribly exposed, but the ache in my stomach is getting worse, and my legs feel far away and floating. I grit my teeth and start through the unoccluded port, my footsteps ringing across the metal floor of the port. I expect to feel a stinging pain in my side at any moment, but the port is eerily still.

The cargo deck of the ship is open. I fix my eyes on the ramp. It grows nearer and nearer, and still there is no call over the loudspeaker for me to halt, still no shot. Men stand in the bay of the ship, watching me, and I put all the power that I can into my legs. I stretch out an arm to them, I readjust my mother's gun —can't let it go, can't leave it here—but I think that is my mistake.

The moment my feet touch the ship's ramp, I feel it. The sting in my forehead. Someone shouts "NO!" but I am already falling, pitching backwards onto the metal floor of the port. My mother's shotgun clatters onto the ground next to me. I land on my back, my eyes fixed on the globe that has always hung in the sky above us. It is beautiful tonight, as beautiful as it has been every other night, and tears form in the back of my throat as I watch the white swirls across its surface.

No, I can't go yet. Not yet.

There was my sister Annika, standing in our backyard in the blue nighttime, her hair lit up almost green. "Don't pity me," she said, and her voice was small and a little mean. She was in her bare feet and a white slip, and her blonde hair hung over her shoulder. "Do I look like I'm someone to cry for?"

She did. I could see her bones through the back of her nightgown. She wouldn't turn around to look.

I open my eyes —

There was Vassa in muddy trousers, staring at me guilty in the same back yard. "I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to wake you."

I hadn't been sleeping. "You could've called," I said, though I knew he wasn't here to see me. It was a sort of game we played. I pretended that he was here to throw rocks at my window, he was here to watch Annika through hers.

He pretended to be sheepish. “Of course,” he said. “Next time. Can I come in?” I opened the window wider and he climbed up the trellis and gracefully through my window, into my house. It was easier to pretend.

— my head shatters against the hard metal of the flooring, I am bleeding out of my ears, my eyes show me only gray —

There was my mother, standing over me, and I was in the closet kneeling. “It's nothing worth being upset about, Adrastea.” She was acting like it was a minor inconvenience, but my sister was dead, staring back at us with electric blue eyes. “We all have to move on.”

— pain radiates around my skull, from my forehead down, past my ears and down the nape of my neck, like someone has poured hot oil down my scalp and down my body —

I tried to. I'm trying to. But I don't want to leave my sister behind.

Chapter 2.

“How many spots of light do you see?” The man has a penlight, and he points it at the bridge of my nose. “Can you make your eyes focus?”

Through the slit of my eyelids, I see one light. I raise one finger. My arm sings out in pain.

“Very good, thank you.” The doctor, I assume, switches the penlight off and puts it in his pocket. “Can you speak? Anything, a noise, to make sure those vocal cords are still working. Can you tell me your name?”

I frown, hard, and pain shoots through the top of my head from behind my eyes, down into the bridge of my nose. I twitch my head. It feels like someone has stuck a pin from the top of my scalp into my brain, and I can feel the sharp point scraping at the inside. Tears flood the tops of my cheeks. I didn’t think it would hurt this badly.

“That’s all right, you’re all right.” The doctor’s face is kind. His mustache moves as he speaks. His skin is dark, and his ears twitch when his mouth turns up. “You lie back for a minute. Are you too cold? Do you need another blanket?”

A lot of his talk seems intended for his own benefit. I hadn’t noticed I was cold, but when he mentions it I feel the scratchy blanket that someone has pulled up over my bare legs, up to my chest. I am dressed in clothes that aren’t mine either, clothes that rub under my arms in a funny way. I shake my head no, as minimally as I can, in case he needs an answer.

The doctor makes a noise in the back of his throat and moves to a counter full of pipettes and tablet screens. I raise my neck so I can watch him more carefully. The room is completely white, with the light from the ceiling reflecting off of every surface. The ceiling is one sheet of smooth white metal, and the walls slope into the floor, so for a moment I think I am inside of an

egg. A cloud that is hovering in what could've been thought of as a corner. The cloud turns magenta, then puce, and then back to an orange, as though it is blinking at me, slowly. I have never seen this place before, never seen a thing like that before.

I quickly put my head back on the small pillow. I cough, again, a fire in the back of my throat. "Where is Annika?" I ask. The voice does not sound like mine.

"Ah!" The doctor turns back to me, and he smiles warmly. I don't know if he's heard what I said, beyond that I had spoken. "It's all right dear, you're safe." He beams at me and returns to the counter, where he is studying one of the screens intently.

That isn't what I asked. I let my eyes unfocus in the white of the room. Annika. A pain pulsates above my temple, making it hard to think. What had I been doing? How had I gotten here? I could remember running — why? I want to press my palm to my forehead, but there is a strange pressure around my wrists.

A pneumatic door hisses open, hisses shut. More voices. I keep my eyes closed, try to discern one from the next, but they are low. The doctor protests, loudly, and receives a quiet response. I wait for them to speak to me, but instead they only whisper.

The wave of pain in my forehead crests, smashes down, almost drowns them out. Straining my ears sends another vibration through my skull, and my teeth grind in the back of my mouth. I make a small noise, press my cheek against the pillow. It occurs to me that I am strapped to this bed, with a thick belt wrapping around my middle, and matching belts around my wrists. I try not to cry out. A door hisses closed, the conversation in the room drops off.

"It's okay," the doctor says, and he is standing over me again. "You're safe. Those are for your own protection. You were fighting against the sedation when we first brought you in. Don't

strain your arm, I'll let you go." He undoes my hands, and immediately I draw them up to my chest, so my fists are tucked underneath my chin.

"Everything will turn out," the doctor continues, reaching under the bed I'm on, adjusting a dial I can't see. For a moment, I think he is still talking to me, but he is no longer looking at me. Instead, he is looking over his shoulder at the cloud in the corner. "It's going to work out all right, Tethys, no matter what *they* say. It will all be all right."

I hope so. The voice is sonorous, audible not in my ears but in the back of my chest, where my ribs meet my spine. *We have never had reason to mistrust Hanna before, and I hope we won't have another.*

The doctor leaves the room, the door shutting behind him, and the lights dim – a power conservation mode. I shift in the bed I am strapped to, and the discomfort at the small of my back reminds me that I have never spent a night in a bed not my own. Only Annika had left our home when we were children, and when she did I thought it was the end of the world.

The night before she left we were sitting in the tent in my bedroom, our knees touching each other, our foreheads pressed together. Her eyes were deep brown, the same color as my own. Our faces were similar, everyone had always said so. Our features were mostly the same — our mother's nose, our father's eyebrows, the sharp casts of their faces — except for our hair. except for our hair. Hers was light and blonde, and mine was dark brown.

"Don't miss me when I'm gone," she said, and she smoothed the hair away from my face, tucking it behind my ear. She was four years older than me, and I believed every word that came out of her mouth. "You have important things to do here, remember?" She was going away on

her first internship in the morning. This would be the first time either of us would leave our biodome in our whole lives.

I gulped and I held my tears in the back of my throat. “I’m twelve, Annika, I’m not a *baby*.” I don’t know what I meant by that — if I didn’t need to do the tasks she sent me, or if I wouldn’t forget. Certainly, I took notes on all of Annika’s targets religiously, sorting them into columns in my notebook and making marks by their names.

“You’re right, you’re not a baby,” she said, and she pressed a kiss to my forehead, hard enough to leave a mark. “I’ll be back soon. I won’t be gone any time at all, promise. There’s no need to cry.”

I held onto her and pretended I wasn’t crying. The blue of the night shone in through the window and cradled us both, wrapping us in its glow.

Chapter 3.

By the end of the day, I am able to sit up. The ache in my stomach is gone, but I don't want to ask about it, don't want to draw attention to it. My stomach is covered in my sickbed uniform, so I don't even have to look and see what has happened to it. For his part, the doctor, Dr. Garland has wrapped a strip of gauze around my forehead, providing a gentle pressure at my temples. It keeps my headache at bay, keeps my head from view.

The cloud has left the room sometime in the interim, and I don't know how to ask — what *was* that? What *is* that? Instead, I sit and allow Dr. Garland to move my chin with his hand. He is peering into my eyes with his penlight, checking to see if he can see something within them, maybe.

My thoughts grind to a sudden halt.

I wonder what color my eyes are.

"All right," he says, and he lets go of my face. "How is that?"

"I'm okay, I think." My voice is still creaky, but I can speak. I'm wearing a sani-plasti dress that chafes at the back of my legs and under my arms, and is belted around the waist with another piece of plasti. "My head still hurts a little."

"Well." The doctor looks at my gauze cautiously, like he is unwilling to touch it again. He is tall and lanky, like the gravitational forces of whatever place he'd grown up hadn't been strong enough to keep his shoulders where they should be. "That will probably be the case for a while. Can you stand? Can I help you?"

He offers me his arm and I slide off the table, putting all my weight on his forearm.

My feet are wobbly underneath my body. I hold onto his arm tightly, so he is doing most of the work, and I let him lead me a couple of steps across the cold white floor. My legs are

weak. I shake as I walk, I shake as I hold tight to Dr. Garland. The egg-room is small, but there are many instruments on the countertop and carts in the middle of the room without care for who may walk among them.

He nods at me, encouraging, as I try out my legs as if for the first time. “You’re doing so well. Here — would you sit here for me? In this chair, it’s nicer than the bed.”

I sit. The chair is a little nicer. There is a cushion that sticks to the back of my thighs. “May I have something else to wear?”

The doctor turns, as though surprised to hear me speak unprompted. “Of course,” he says, “Of course. I’ll call the captain and ask her to bring some spares in. You look like you could be her size.” He smiles again. His smiling seems almost like a defense mechanism.

“Okay. Thank you.” I nod. I don’t know how much gratitude I should show. It doesn’t feel like I am in a hospital. He probably wouldn’t have tied me to the bed if I was in a hospital.

“I’m going to put these little electrodes, I hope you don’t mind, on your face and— well, I’d put them on your head, but. I’ll try to put them on your forehead, tell me if I’m hurting you.” Half of the time, I don’t know if the doctor is speaking to me, or speaking to be heard. He attaches me to the nodes, and when he is done, I have so many wires coming out of me, I look like a marionette.

“Okay,” he says, and he smiles at me as if I should be please, too. “Are you ready? I’m going to ask you some questions. To double check on that brain of yours.”

My head pounds. I don’t know what that means. I can feel my muscles tensing already. The door is shut and I can’t see how to open it, so I couldn’t leave this room even if I wanted to. His earnest eyes make it worse. “Okay.”

“Fantastic. Alright, when I ask you a question, I want you to answer it as truthfully as you can. Once you answer, I’ll note it, but mostly I’m worried about checking your blood pressure and making sure all systems are intact. Does that sound good?” He sits next to me and pulls a tab onto his lap, so that he can keep his eyes on me.

I nod. My eyes are getting dry and heavy.

“First question — What is your name?”

I resist the urge to scrunch up my face. If I lie about my name now, I’ll surely forget what lie I told later. “Adra,” I say. I catch my breath, hold it through my nose. I am so breathless that it doesn’t hurt.

Dr. Garland pauses, the same moment I do, and for a moment, we watch each other without looking at each other. “Nice to meet you, Adra. All right.” He scribbles something on a tab, his voice carefully neutral. He frowns and pokes at one of his machines. “And do you remember what you were doing last night?”

“I was running.” I was leaving.

Dr. Garland makes another note, still frowning. “Do you know why?”

I frown. “No.” I cannot remember. I check through my mind. I was leaving— I had been planning on leaving all week. I was leaving my Mother, because things were bad. Annika was sick, Mother was going to send her away. Had Mother sent her away already? I search my recent memories desperately, and I cannot find my sister’s face there. My vision narrows until I can hardly see outside of my own body. “No, I can’t — ”

Dr. Garland puts the tab to the side, and he leans closer to me, like we are in a discussion. “You don’t remember why you were running to the spaceport?”

I shake my head. My voice is clotted with tears. “No.” I remember opening my eyes and knowing that I was bleeding. I can’t remember any of the hours before that. I take a deep breath, try to smooth myself out. “When I try to think about it, my head hurts.”

“Okay.” Dr. Garland taps at the screen in front of him, with a pointed finger. “What do you think about the reclamationist movement?”

“Vassa is one of the reclamationists,” I say. My forthcomingness surprises me. I take another deep breath. “When we were younger, he wanted to go and join the fight. I always thought he was lying.”

“Huh.” That answer stumps Dr. Garland. He leans back in his chair and scribbles a lot on the tab. “How do you remember that, but not yesterday? What is the last thing you remember?”

I take a deep breath. “Um, I remember packing my bags on my bedroom floor.” I can’t remember the scene around it, why I was packing, but I remember my hands folding shirts, tucking them in together. Where had they gone? I don’t remember dropping the bag as I ran, but my memory is too shaky even for me to rely on.

He nods encouragingly, and writes a lot. “So, do you remember if you’ve been in touch with the Senate?”

“The Senate?” What a landmine of a question. I curl my hands into fists and keep my body still. “Why would I have ever been in touch with *them*?”

He laughs, but it seems a little short. For a man who has tied me to a hospital bed and is interrogating me while I sit, cold and helpless on this chair, he is really very kind, and I feel that I am in danger of commiserating with him wholeheartedly.

“I have to ask these things,” he says, and the corners of his eyes are crinkled up kindly. “There was some hubbub getting you on board, do you remember that?” He checks his tab, without waiting for an answer. “Are you hungry?”

“No. Did I get shot? Is that why my head hurts?”

Dr. Garland looks at me slowly, his face creasing in a strange way. “Yes, Adra, you’ve been shot in your head and in your stomach. Are you not—do you not feel it? I gave you some more sedation about four hours ago, but you really aren’t feeling anything?”

“I have a headache,” I say, slightly affronted. I touch the soft part of my stomach, underneath the shell of my ribs, where the ache had been. There is a pinch of pain there, but not enough to make me cry out. “You must’ve given me more sedatives than you thought. Maybe that’s why I can’t remember anything.” The idea that I have been shot seems very far away. I can’t touch it. “Do you know where Annika is?”

“Annika? I’m sorry, I’m not sure I know who that is.” Dr. Garland’s smile is smooth. There is a wrinkle in his cheek. His arms are full of tension, as though he is carrying a lie. “Do you remember anything else?”

“My sister --” I struggle to think, my brain catching on the small details that I know should be there. “I was looking for her. I thought -- I was looking for her?”

Dr. Garland’s eyebrows draw together. “There is no Annika here.”

I can feel my jaw tighten, and breath comes uneasily to my lungs, filling me up in only a haphazard sort of way. “Do you know where I can find her?”

He moves next to me, puts his hand on my shoulder. “We’ll figure it out,” he says. “You don’t need to worry,” he says again, his voice gentle. He unwraps the gauze from around my head. In the silence, it takes forever, his breath loud in the quiet room, his fingertips whispering

over the lobe of my ear. When he is done, a cool breeze brushes against my scalp, and with a sinking heart I realize that at least half of my hair is gone.

A lump forms in my throat. I close my eyes.

I cannot cry in front of him. I cannot cry here. I bite my bottom lip.

Dr. Garland pokes at my scalp, cold and clinical, before rewrapping the gauze around my head. The tension in his arms makes his words feel like a lie. “Something to keep an eye on. I’m going to get some warmer clothes for you from the captain, don’t want you catching a chill. You can take those wires off you now,” he says, as he leaves. The door closes behind him, leaving me alone.

I pull the leads off of my forehead, not caring where they fall. They swing and hang in colored arcs above the floor. The machine does not beep as I pull them away. I wonder if I’ve heard it beep at all this whole time. I blink, hard, forcing out the tears that come to my eyes.

I remember my sister, my lovely sister, lying on a bed, staring up at the ceiling, and I want to know where she is, but the thought is so far away. Where is she? Where had she been, when I was leaving? Have I been chasing after her?

I feel cut off from everything, adrift. My lips are dry against each other, and my head feels heavy, as though it has been filled with tiny balls of lead. If I lift up my dressing gown, to look at my stomach, I know what I’ll see, but it’s easier to keep my eyes closed.

Chapter 4.

I am on the *Enetai*, which is a low-orbit transportation ship meant for ferrying food and small supplies between planets. It is a small ship, clearly meant for only traveling through the inner ring, but it bears wear and tear that I am sure has accumulated from jumping to the outer rings. The inside is made of one sheet of metal, dull gray, that bends overhead. I feel as though I am tucked inside a large metal can.

A large cargo hold takes up the center of the ship, and the rest of the rooms and berths are shoved into the places that the hold doesn't occupy. Dr. Garland's medical bay is tucked into the aft of the ship, and the mess is tucked closer to the helm. I can look over the side of the metal walkway that connects the medical bay to the mess and see into the cargo hold.

I peek over the railing as I am being walked to my berth. The hold is only half-full of boxes. Some of the boxes are stamped as fragile, but more have the tax stamps of food transportation on their lids. A portion of the floor is stained rust red and there is a mop bucket next to it, as if someone has been scrubbing. I close my eyes and turn away.

The rest of the ship is off-limits, really. There is a helm that Dr. Garland gently informed me I was not allowed into unless I was explicitly invited. I am led to a berth that is halfway between the entrance to the mess and medical bay, probably so that Dr. Garland can keep a close eye on me. It doesn't seem like there are many places to hide in the ship, though. I won't be able to get out from under his supervision even if I try.

I am shown my room, which is only as wide as the length of one of my arms. There is a bed built into one wall and a dresser built into the other, and a plasti mirror pasted over the drawers that is scratched and dented.

Dr. Garland gives me a jumpsuit. “Courtesy of the captain,” he says. “If you’re uncomfortable sleeping by yourself, you can always sleep in the med bay, but she thought that you might want some privacy.”

The captain. Dr. Garland had mentioned her before, but I had not caught sight of her. In my room, change into the jumpsuit gratefully, shedding the plasti-sani dress as fast as I can. I try not to catch sight of the silver gash along my stomach in the mirror, try not to see how the silver begins between my breasts and widens as it descends over my stomach, only to disappear before it crosses to my hips. I close my eyes so I won’t have to see it, button the suit as quickly as I can so that my knuckles do not brush the gash on my stomach.

The jumpsuit is made of a brown denim fabric, and it is a little small on my arms and my legs, but it is belted comfortably around my middle. Despite the odd fit, it is so much better than the stupid sani-plasti dress, which I ball up and hand back to hand out the door to Dr. Garland, so he can sanitize it and use it to torture someone else.

In the dented mirror of my berth, I can see myself more clearly -- the gauze wrapped around my head, a few chunks of straggling dark hair hanging around my shoulders. It is dark and limp, nothing like Annika’s soft waves. The wells underneath my eyes are deep and purple, and my lips look white and pale.

I don’t want to see my eyes, but I can’t help it. They are blue, on fire. I can see through them, and they can see through me. They are my sister’s eyes, bright and terrible.

My head hurts, a slight pulse. Where is she?

I remember standing in my sister’s closet, going through all the clothes in there. Her wardrobe was full of sparkling things and shiny satin fabrics, and I ran my fingers over the material, feeling as though I was swimming within each dress. There was a noise outside of the

room, and I froze, turning suddenly, and I caught sight of my face in the mirror. There are no bags underneath my eyes. My long dark hair is shiny around my shoulders, I was wearing some sort of pajamas. The two images— my face then, my face now, are posed side-by-side in my mind.

“Ads!” my sister called then, and presently I startle.

I meet the crew in the mess hall. There are five crew members total, a small group.

Dr. Garland, of course, I know, and he takes the role of interlocutor. “Adra,” he says, with his hand on my shoulder as he leads me into the narrow mess hall, “This is the captain, Captain Lessels. I’m sure you’ve heard me speak of her.”

I nod. I have. I don’t recognize the name beyond that. “Thank you for the clothes,” I say.

Captain Lessels nods. She is a petite woman, shorter than me. Her skin is dark and her hair is long, tightly curled up around her shoulders. She wears an olive green jacket with dark epaulets, a military styling I am not familiar with. Her pants are black, almost painted onto her legs, and she carries a gun around her hips.

My forehead itches looking at the grip.

“Of course,” she says. Her brown eyes search me for something I can’t understand. “Jack says that you’re feeling better.”

I nod. Jack must be Dr. Garland. “I am. I think. Not sure yet.”

Despite the small crew, the eyes on me are still overwhelming. The mess hall is narrow and short, with the space in the middle taken up by a table. Dr. Garland and I are pressed against the tile wall, looking out at the other four. Captain Lessels and a man in an apron are sitting on

the bench, their legs sticking out into the aisle. The man's legs are long enough that the tip of his boots are pressed against the wall.

Two of the crew members, or beings that Dr. Garland indicates to be crew members, are not even people in the way I expect people to be, and they float physically over the table, as clouds. I try my hardest not to look at them, so they won't think I'm staring. One is the cloud I had seen hovering in Dr. Garland's bay when I had first woken up, and it transitions colors now, from a warm orange to a cool magenta.

The other being is similarly a cloud, but a deeper color—more of a muddy black. They are floating in a column, instead of in a flat line, and I desperately want to gape, but I also desperately want to make at least a decent impression. A nervous energy buzzes between all of the crew members.

The final human in the room, the man in the apron, stands up from where he is sitting and shakes my hand, awkwardly. He doesn't make eye contact. He is roughly my height, wearing his blonde hair pulled back into a bun, and an apron tied around his neck and his waist. His skin is light, except for the tops of his cheeks, his neck, the tops of his arms, which are dark and covered in small and dark spots, which is another thing I want to stare at, but instead I look at his face. His mouth is pressed together, and his ears stick out a little from the side of his head. His apron is stained with many colors.

"Heck Tae," he says, "ship's cook."

He shakes my hand quickly and hard enough that I am unable to reciprocate the shake. He steps back, still looking at me. Intellectually I know that people recognize my face from the broadcasts, but it is odd to be watched so intently by strangers.

“And of course, the non-human members of the crew. Tethys and Dys, our resident exos. We were all a little worried you’d have a reaction when you see them, but here they are.” Dr. Garland steers my shoulders so I can’t help but make direct eye contact with the two clouds. Exoterrestrials. If I squint, I can make out the faint outline of eyes in each through their vaporous outer-layer.

“Hello,” I say, and my voice quivers. “I’m Adra,” I look back at Dr. Garland, and Captain Lessels, and Heck Tae. “I don’t think I’ve ever met any exos, I’m sorry.” I try to keep my tone as polite as possible. I try to keep my hands steady. I worry that they know my family’s secret. I worry that they can tell it just by looking at me.

Captain Lessel exhales forcefully. “What?” Her shoulders drop, her eyes are tight and suspicious, her tone is slightly accusatory as though she is trying to see through my skin, to parse out what is on the inside.

“You look very kind though,” I say, trying to project as much cheerfulness as I can towards the clouds over the table. “I’m sorry, Tethys and— Dys?”

“Tethys is light, Dys is dark.” Dr. Garland slaps my shoulder, and I have the uncomfortable notion that he is making significant faces at Captain Lessels over my head. “That’s the easiest way to remember. Tethys is our navigator, Dys is the company muscle. They’re good folks, but it can be more difficult to hear what they have to say, unless you’re being very still.”

“I think -- you were there when I was in the med bay. “ I try to direct my words to Tethys. “So thank you. I think.”

Tethys makes a noise I can hear in the back of my throat. It is a noise like laughter. *Of course, small Ierde. It is a pleasure to meet you.* They drift closer to me, and as they approach, it

is clear they are not only a cloud, they are a small humanoid thing encased inside a wall of vapor. Their eyes are wide and their expression is beyond the scope of human words to describe, but I hope it is one of laughter.

I smile. Something about them is joyous. “It’s good to meet you, too.”

I open my mouth to say something else, but I am interrupted by a flickering of lights, a deep growl that tickles the bottom of my ribcage, that reinvigorates the ache in my stomach. I cry out and my knees give out. I sink to the floor, and Dys, the dark cloud, grows above us, grows so their mass takes over the ceiling, blocking out the fluorescent lights. I cannot even see their eyes in the cloud anymore. Heck cringes, too, bending backwards so that he is further from Dys’ edges.

This is a mistake, Hanna. Their voice tickles my bones, and I want to curl up into a ball.

This is a horrendous mistake.

Captain Lessels looks at me. Maybe there are tears on her cheek. “I know,” she says. Her face is sad and her voice is small. “But what else are we going to do?”

Chapter 5.

My sister was standing next to my bed, red lipstick across her mouth. She wasn't wearing normal going-out clothes; instead she was dressed like one of the people our mother didn't want us talking to. Short shorts that hardly covered the tops of her legs, and a thin shirt that didn't pull all the way over her stomach. She pushed a backing onto her earring.

"You'll cover for me, right?"

I nodded. I was sixteen, but I was still her little sister. In my vanity mirror, I looked younger than I do now -- not shorter, per se, but wan and *smaller*. I was in bed, the blankets pulled up to my chin. The night outside was bright, and the sun was shining on the roof of our biodome clearly, refracting as though the lights were on.

The only thing that differentiated night from day at Lunum were the clocks.

"So that means, if Lovey comes and checks on my bed, what do you say?" My sister bent over my bed. She was older than me by four years, but the gulf between us had always seemed so much more insurmountable. I wanted to ask why I couldn't come with her—I was old enough now—but her forward movement was implacable, unstoppable. She kissed me on my forehead like I was her child.

"That you had to take a call outside, and then I reset her program and tell her she's already checked on you." We had learned to reset Lovey's systems when we were small, and although we did it less as we got older, it was still a handy trick. All you had to do was press the reset button on the back of her neck to reset her daily memory.

Annika cradled my cheek in the palm of her hand. "Thank you, sweet girl. I'll be home tomorrow morning before breakfast. Don't wait up for me." She crossed the room, and slid out the window, climbing out onto the ledge below it. She hesitated, and then she was gone.

I got out of bed to close the window. The air was still -- it was always still at night, when the filters had been turned down. My sister's blonde head ducked through the wall of shrubs on the other side of the back garden and disappeared. I went back to bed. I don't know if I slept. I do remember waking up, my communicator singing underneath my pillow as my sister tried to reach out to me one last time.

Chapter 6.

I am brought up to the helm to answer more questions. I am wary. People here know more than they should, and I feel as though I should practice silence for my own safety.

“It’s okay,” the captain says, as Tethys brings me into the helm, floating right behind me. “We’re not here to hurt you, you don’t need to look so frightened. Please, sit.”

The helm occupies most of the nose of the *Enetai*. The front is full of panels and dials, and there are two wheeled seats to roll from one panel to the next. The middle of the room has a giant holographic broadcast system, probably meant to project maps. At the moment, though, it is projecting a giant image of my face with the words “REWARD FOR RETURN” and then an obscenely high dollar amount below it.

“Oh, *shit*.”

“Oh shit is right.” Captain Lessels smiles at me, sort of commiserating, and she pushes one of the rolling chairs towards me. “Don’t worry, they won’t find us out here. But you know, if you want to be found, we can arrange that too.”

I sit heavily in the chair, watching Captain Lessels closely, trying to read her thoughts from the twitch of her eyebrows, the movement of her lips.

“No. I don’t want to.” I may not know much, but I know who my mother is. I know what she would do to me.

“Good, okay. That’s something.” The captain presses her hands together. The broadcast of my head rotates slowly in three dimensions, looking at both of us with a dull expression. Broadcasts like this are only projected in one color, so the captain can’t tell the difference between my eyes in that projection and my eyes as they are right now.

Tethys is hovering close to the broadcast, and the light colors of the cast make them appear brighter. *Why would you not want to go home?*

Unconsciously, I touch my stomach, and a pulse of pain goes through my abdomen. “I don’t think it’s a place I want to be anymore. I don’t remember that night at all, but I’m sure that I didn’t leave home—on good terms.”

The captain beams, like this is the best news possible. “Good,” she says. “I mean—you know what I mean, right?”

I frown. Of course I know. “No, I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“You came onto this ship for a purpose, right?”

“I think so. To find Annika.” Right? That is what I have been missing this whole time, since I woke up yesterday. My sister, my Annika.

Captain Lessels and Tethys look at each other. I can tell that they are hiding something from me, but I can’t read their glances.

You were running for our ship like you knew we were going to be in the spaceport.

Tethys’s eyes are big and wide when they turn their gaze back to me, but I believe that is how their eyes typically look. *Did you have information about your sister that connected her to us? Do you remember where she went?*

I shake my head. “I can’t remember. I can remember—” I rub my head. An ache builds in my forehead. “I remember the morning before I left, I remember standing up at the kitchen counter and thinking that *today* is the day that I was leaving. But I don’t know what went wrong.” My voice is full of snot.

The captain looks at Tethys, concerned. “Do you think,” she begins.

Tethys cuts her off, and their voice is stiff and deep, rattling through the wound underneath my ribs. *I know what Dys thinks. I know what you think. I know what you are pretending isn't true.*

“Okay,” the captain says, after a long moment. She looks away from Dys, but she cannot look at me. Instead she stares up at my face, still rotating between us. “Okay.”

“I don’t know what you guys want from me --” I am on the edge of wailing, my voice pitching up. “I don’t know anything *at all*.” That is a lie. But still. My voice cracks, lends an authenticity to my anxiety.

Tethys, next to me, coos, and the sound runs down my spine. *It's going to be okay, Adrastea*, they say, and their voice is warm throughout my bones. *We won't bring you back with us, if you can help us.*

I sniffle, loudly, and a little bit for effect. I don’t know how I can help them, but I will say I can if that is what they need. “Thank you,” I say. I adjust myself and sit up fully in the chair. My head is still pounding, but I rub my eyes to push the pain out. “Thank you. Where are we traveling to?”

Captain Lessels and Tethys exchange another look, and the captain speaks hesitantly. She takes a deep breath, as though steeling herself. “We’re going to the tenth encampment, to the reclamationists. Dr. Garland said you had some familiarity with the group?”

Like lightning through my body I remember Vassa. Of course, he has always been there, but suddenly, I see his wide smile missing teeth, his wide eyes. “I do, I think I do—Vassa and his mother disappeared, and I think they went to the reclamationists, but I can't remember for sure, but I know— Annika told me.” My head is hurting. I try to rub at the itchy part of my scalp through the gauze.

Captain Lessels, puts a hand on my arm. “It’s okay, Adra, please don’t overexert yourself. Do you need to lie down? Do we need to get Jack?”

I shake my head, but I’m gritting my teeth, and the noise echoes through the top of my skull. The memory is on the tip of my tongue. “Was I trying to go to the tenth encampment? Do you think— Is Annika with Vassa? Is he keeping her safe?” That makes sense. Vassa loved her more than anything, he would always keep my sister safe.

“I don’t think so, Adra.” The captain is close to me, suddenly, suspiciously close. “There was some news about your sister four years ago.” Her hand is on my arm. “Adra, your sister’s funeral was broadcast. She’s gone.”

Chapter 7.

My mother told Annika and I that the atmosphere et Terra was poisonous. We were taught this in class, but we were also taught this while sitting at the kitchen table, our legs kicking out into the empty air. “One day,” Mother told us, “when our ancestors were a young civilization, the atmosphere turned against them. The waters boiled and became rancid, and then the water swallowed up the land, destroying all the cities they’d built and all the fertile land for crops.”

She told this like it was a scary story, her voice low enough to send bumps along my arms. She leaned forward while she talked, holding our wrists in her hands. Mother wasn’t around often, and when she was, Annika and I were desperate to claim any portion of her attention, desperate for her hand on our skin.

“There will be people who tell you otherwise,” my mother said, her dark eyes deep and intentional, pinning us down to our chair. “Et Terra hasn’t recovered from its sickness. The plant is still sick and spewing poison out through its atmosphere. Even though our ancestors were all smart enough to leave, some stupid people stayed. They’re stubborn and reckless, and look at me, Annika — those reclamationists are *going* to get themselves killed.”

Annika was unmoved. She stared back at our mother, her profile delicately lit by the light over kitchen sink. “Okay,” she said, and her face was impassive.

“Okay, Mama,” I said, because I wanted my mother to look back at me. Instead, she squeezed my wrist and stood up, her gaze still fixed on my sister.

She shouldn’t have worried about Annika. It was me she should’ve kept her eyes on.

Chapter 8.

I am maneuvered into the cargo bay so I can “get some air.”

I had forgotten that Annika’s funeral was televised. I don’t know how I had forgotten that. It had been such a big deal. Mother had been so terrifying that I couldn’t help but sob as I knelt over my sister’s empty coffin, her cold anger radiating out through the chapel. Everyone had thought she had been devastated by the loss of an heir, but I knew better. It had all been my fault. I had been the one to help her sneak out, I had been the one who hadn’t got to her in time.

Tethys hovers near me, genuine concern leaking through their outer valence into my heart. *I’m sorry you are so upset, Adra. We should have been more delicate surrounding the details of your sister’s death. We didn’t--*

I shake my head, and rub my nose. I have been doing a good job of looking more distraught than I actually am. I sniffle, a bit, and pull myself together. “I’m sorry.” I swallow more heavily than I need to. “There’s been a lot going on recently. I don’t know how to figure it all out.” I press my palm to my head again. “And everything hurts so much.”

Tethys clucks, or makes a sound like they’re clucking. There is a moment of hesitation in their form, but I can tell that they are trying to reach out to me. *It was Heck who shot you. He is very sorry, you know. He wants to apologize, he knows that he has hurt you terribly, but Jack thinks it’s better if he stays away. It was very rude of him.* Their tone is very worried.

I wonder how much Tethys knows about me. I don’t want to look at them. I’m afraid that they will be able to see everything on my face. Very rude—what a thing for them to say. “I’ve never met an exo before. I’m pretty sure I would remember it, if I had.”

You probably wouldn’t have heard of any of us. I don’t know if any of our kind have ever been et Lunum, it’s not a very welcoming place for our sort. Is that a note of censor I feel in my

stomach? Tethys seems to not mind the change of topic, though, and they change colors from a concerned lavender to a deeper fuchsia. *Though, maybe a part of you remembers that.*

I try not to flinch away. “Everything about my growing up that I can remember was normal. No one was too loud, no one was too angry. I think we tried to be as welcoming as we could be.” Or, perhaps we weren’t. I was never able to tell. “We’re going et Terra, right?”

We are. The location is a secret, so we’re not allowed to tell you right now, but know that you will be safe there. Tethys turns back to a gentle pink. *You are under my protection as long as you are a part of this crew. No matter what.*

I swallow. I do not look at them. “Except for the time your cook shot me?” I try to keep my voice light.

Tethys stops moving for a second, the edges of their cloud pull into themselves, their inner eyes widening beyond typical. Their next noise is laughter full of shock, and it rolls down my back, tickling. I giggle, from Tethys’ reaction, and then from the sensation of laughter rolling along my spine.

You are very funny, Adrastea Ierde. I hope you learn to trust us very much, Tethys says, when they have calmed, the edges of their cloud stilling. *Because I would very much like to learn to trust you.*

Chapter 9.

Captain Lessels tells us to prepare to land at the tenth encampment tomorrow at dinner mess. We have been hanging around in the Belt, waiting for a signal that would mean the *Enetai* could approach. I would like to ask again where the tenth encampment is, but instead I keep my mouth shut. A reclamationist stronghold like the tenth encampment will have more answers.

I haven't been feeling very hungry, but that doesn't feel like something I should broadcast either. I pick at my food while I'm eating it. Dr. Garland and Captain Lessels are talking passionately at one end of the long table, and I can feel the low rumble of Dys' voice through my collarbones and my stomach, although I cannot make out what they are saying. Tethys is there too, but I cannot make out their lighter tones. The cook, Heck, had served us all of our food, but now he sits in the middle of the table, between the conversation and myself. He looks as though he is half paying attention to them, but I can also tell that he is watching me.

I cut the rehydrated potatoes in half with my knife, pushing half to one side of the plate, half to the other. "Thanks for making dinner."

"Yeah," he says, not meeting my eyes. "No problem. It's my job."

I stab my synthmeat viciously. "Okay. Still, thank you."

"Right. Yeah." He sounds embarrassed. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry, I—"

"Tethys said you shot me." I push another bit of potato around the plate. "And now you're avoiding me." I try to channel Annika. A bit of an arched eye, a bit of a mean nose, a bit of a frown. My sister always knows how to get people to tell her everything she wants to know.

"Yeah." Heck nods. He stares at his plate again. "I—you can't *just* apologize for shooting someone? I've been trying all day. Especially to a stranger, or to, you know, *you*. I'm worried

you'll have me executed or something, you know? Eye for an eye, or whatever you moon people do." He exhales like he was making a joke, but I don't know what the funny part is.

I press some potato down so that it is very small. Pieces erupt through the tines of my fork. "I don't think we ever executed anyone. Not that I remember."

"Your memory seems super reliable, so I'll take that as gospel." He looks at me for a second, and I think he seriously intends to be mean, until his face breaks into a smile, wide and genuine. He is a well-built man, about my height, but not in the thin and stretched out way of people who were born in low gravity. His hair is blonde and pulled back behind his head, although it escapes wildly. His nose is crooked too, broken and never given corrective surgery. "Are you feeling okay?"

I shrug. I don't want to get into it. "Do you know where the tenth encampment is?"

"The captain told me that you might try to be sly." He smiles at me. "But she said we're not supposed to tell you anything anyways."

I nod. That tracks.

"I think it's sort of badass, though." He shrugs, looks away. I can tell he admires me in that simple motion, that he knew of me before I set foot on this ship. "That you're escaping from your family like this. It's super radical, I wish more people were like you and could see—I mean, Jack said that you were in with the *reclamationists*."

"I thought you guys were reclamationists. Are you not?" I had been, as much as I could be. Iyleen had trusted me, but never enough to tell me anything *real*. I want to put a piece of food into my mouth and chew it, to have the feeling of normalcy, but I know from experience that will end poorly.

Heck lays his hand flat and wiggles it back and forth. “They give us funding and we bring food where they need it. Honestly, the most righteous set of boy scouts I’ve ever met, but they have the right idea. Not the *best* idea, mind you, but the right one.” Heck puts a full forkful of potato into his mouth and eats it wholly, hardly even chewing. “I mean, we’re headed to their camp now, but that’s mostly because Hanna doesn’t know what to do with you.”

I don’t know what to do with myself. “Did I say anything? When you shot me?”

Heck flinches. “No. I mean, you were screaming. A lot. But, no, not *saying* anything.”

My stomach twists over on itself and I look at my plate. I have made a collage of pasted food. “Nothing about my sister?” My voice is low and sad.

“Nothing about your sister.” Heck is still red from the tip of his toes to the top of his ears, but he answers my question with a sort of gentle confusion.

And because I don’t know when to stop, I stab my fork into the mess in front of me again. “*Why* did you shoot me?”

“You were terrifying,” he says. “I’m sorry. You had a gun, and you were coming towards us, and there was so much blood—honestly, you were bleeding so much, I thought you must’ve been covered in someone else’s blood. I thought you were on a rampage.” He sounds genuinely sorry. His whole demeanor has changed, bent down under the weight of my question. “I mean, you must’ve been, right? I couldn’t even tell who you were. Jack says I must not have shot you too deep, that metal plate in your head kept you from being too injured.”

He thinks I have a metal plate in my head. That’s alright, then. “I’m not mad.” I suppress the urge within myself to reach out and touch my bandages. I keep my fingers wrapped tightly around the knife. “I only wanted to know.”

“Okay.” Heck does seem dimmer, but he goes back to eating, or at least pushing his food around his plate. ““You don’t have to say that it’s okay, though. It was a dumbshit thing to do.”

“Really,” I say, leaning forward. Heck is warm and easy, and he speaks so freely that I feel almost guilty. “I’m okay. It could’ve gone to shit, but it didn’t.”

“You’re right.” He looks at me again, guileless. “It didn’t.”

Chapter 10.

Back at home, in the closet across from my bedroom, there was something I loved dearly. I hated to think about it. It was always there, and when I closed my eyes, it would creep into my bedroom and lie next to me, under my comforter, trying to take my warmth into itself. It was long and bony, its spine growing more and more prominent by the month, its fingers long and weak. I would wake up, and its hands would be on either side of my neck, its forehead pressed against mine.

I could never say no. I could never deny my Annika anything.

Chapter 11.

I was nine when in class Ms. Lias brought up a broadcast of children et Ceres, and asked us to tell her what was different about these children from the *regular*, healthy children whose families were part of the system Senate. The broadcast was horrific, especially because we had never even considered that hunger existed. The children in the cast were standing together, four of them, their arms looped around each other, their eyes wide and ravenous. Their arms were so skinny that their heads seemed huge, and their dark hair was cropped short to the top of their heads. There was no way to tell if they were boys or girls. It was clear from their exaggerated height that they had never received proper gravity treatment.

I didn't want to look at them.

I put my head on my desk and refused to see, even when Ms. Lias gave us a very strict talking to, and told us it was our civic duty to understand why the Senate was important, and how they kept us out of poverty. "The parents of these children have fled their civic duty, and we should view them as examples as to why we should become the best citizens we can be. Adrastea, please pick your head up off your desk."

I couldn't. My face was full of snot. I shook my head, my forehead still pressed against the cool plasti. There were only eight other children in my age group in the biodome, eight other kids in my class, and I could hear them giggling.

Ms. Lias came over and knelt next to me. Her voice was so low that only I could hear it. "Why are you so upset, Adrastea?"

"Why can't we feed them?" I was sobbing, so I'm sure it was hard to hear what I was saying, my sentences broken up in staccato. "I have left over dinner —"

Ms. Lias made a noise in the back of her throat, and I felt her hand on my back, rubbing in circles. “We all have to be the best people we can be, all right Adrastea? And one day, when you’re old enough, you *have* to make the right choices.”

I didn’t look up as she walked away. I didn’t look up until the light of the broadcast was gone, and the images of the children had been removed from the middle of the classroom.

Eight years later, I joined the reclamationists.

Chapter 12.

When I wake up I put on another clean jumpsuit without looking at my stomach and unwind the gauze from my head, under the pretext of cleaning my wounds. The gauze hasn't been stained with blood for the past couple of days, and I can't resist the urge to see the metal plate that Heck insinuated was in my scalp. In the pit of my stomach, I still think that there will be a scab under the gauze, that there is a sticky mass of blood hiding underneath the white surface, but the gauze comes all the way off easily. I am left looking at myself once again in the dented mirror.

I feel like my eyesight has grown stronger, although it is hard to tell in a ship that is so close together. I can see the pores on my face and the fine hairs that grow over the bridge of my nose without straining my eyes too hard. Everything is a little bit clearer, a little off kilter, like I soldered glasses to my face. I can see the texture of the gauze, feel the coarse weft underneath my fingertips.

I don't think I look like myself anymore. I used to look how Annika used to look, with a wide and full face and a smile that was always ready. Now I look almost how Annika did the last time that I saw her. My eyes have become blue, terrible to behold. My face is narrow and wan and my dark hair hangs only over one of my shoulders. My left shoulder is completely bare, my ear naked and cold. Some of my hair has been shaved off after the fact. I can tell by the measured length of hair cut above my ear and below it, down to the nape of my neck.

My bare skull is stark and shiny. There is a large and thick silver line from my forehead that runs over the crest of my head and around the back of my skull. Sort of like my stomach, it looks like a gash that is full of colloidal silver. I touch it, and I feel no pain. My fingers skid off the silver, unable to find purchase. This is not a plate that has been installed in my head. It has

grown seamlessly from the rest of my skin, perfectly filling in whatever portion of me Heck shot off.

My stomach bundles up on itself. My hair, at least there, is never coming back. Neither is the rest of me. I wind the gauze around my head, hiding the silver scar from view.

Chapter 13.

Vassa told me when he was six and I was five that he had a great mission to go on in the future, and that I wasn't invited.

I don't know how seriously I took anything he said. Vassa would come over to our house every day. Our mother liked to keep an eye on his family.

"Maybe I do want to go on a mission," I would say, back before Vassa's father was taken. I wanted to play with Vassa more than he wanted to play with me, and I would grow petulant at his mere tolerance of me. "I'm stronger than you, and I'm braver."

Vassa sneered. "No you're not. You're littler, by two whole years. Besides, you're not invited, you can't be invited. Not you, or Anni. You're never allowed to come." He had always been a classically handsome child, with big curls and wide eyes that spoke to a legacy of wealth and aristocracy.

"You're not my mom!"

"Your mom's not invited either." Maybe we were building blocks or maybe it was only me who was building blocks, while Vassa towered over the structure triumphantly. "It's going to be me and my dad and all of his friends. We're going to make a new government, and we'll go et Terra and no one else will be allowed to come, and it will be ours!" He punched his hand up into the air. He was always a classically handsome kid, with dark hair and deep, tumultuous eyes.

"You're not allowed," I said. "It's bad to breathe down there. You need to wear a mask all the time." I knew this, because I ritualistically asked Lovey about what was happening on the planet below every night. I could see it from my window, see the white clouds that moved across it. "And there are bears." Bears had featured heavily in recent nightmares.

Vassa looked at me scornfully. “There are no bears. The government killed them all. That’s what *my* dad says, and my dad knows better than your *robot*.”

That made me start to snot up. Vassa liked to say I had no real parents, just a robot parent, because my mother was never around.

“This is why you can’t go on a mission et Terra,” he said. “You’re too much of a cry baby,” and he left me alone with a tower of blocks and a running nose.

The year after, Vassa’s father was taken into custody for terroristic threats made against the governor. He died in custody a few weeks later. After that, Vassa was set adrift, secretive. Nine years later, during Annika’s funeral, he left for real. His and his mother pulled their demographic information from the Net, sold all their furniture, and ripped up their identification cards before catching an unnamed transport out of the biodome.

In some naive way, I always thought he would come back. He always had, when we were kids. I had never thought he would really be swallowed up by the great green-and-blue. Later, when I had my own missions, I would watch the planet he sent himself to, and wonder if we were really so dissimilar.

Chapter 14.

We approach et Terra. I do not know what to expect, I have never been in a real atmosphere before, and I am afraid that I will asphyxiate, that my lungs raised in a false atmosphere will be too delicate to maintain homeostasis in a wild atmosphere. Heck tries to tell me that it doesn't work like that, and Dr. Garland concurs, but I don't think I believe either of them.

"It's okay," Heck says, "It's all oxygen. I mean, the oxygen was never the issue."

Et Lunum, there are air scrubbers that run twelve hours a day, and they make sure that everything is clean and easy to breathe. Make sure that there's a proper mix of oxygen and nitrogen and hydrogen. "Other stuff creeps in, though," I tell Heck, my arms crossed across my chest. "There is so much -- it's a whole planet full of toxins."

"Well, the toxins have mostly diluted," Dr. Garland says. We are sitting in the mess together, and he is absentmindedly going through a bag full of medical supplies. Rearranging gauze and going through syringes and e-packs. "The microplastics are still everywhere, and you can't drink water out of streams, but the atmo is generally harmless."

"My family *grows* food on the land," Heck says, as though that is supposed to prove anything. "Honestly, it's the synthmeat that's the poison, you don't really know what that stuff even is."

I still have my doubts.

I do not know for sure if Annika is in the tenth encampment or not, but the idea is seeming increasingly more likely to me. Annika has always been craftier than me. It could be that she even arranged the *Enetai* to pick me up. But I keep that private hope to myself, because clearly no one here is aware of Annika at all, and I would like to keep it that way, if possible.

I haven't seen Dys since last night in the mess, and their absence is even more of a presence. Sometimes I feel as though I can see shadows moving out of the corner of my eye, darkness flickering and bending around a corner in a way that it shouldn't, but I can't tell for sure. I like to think that perhaps they are up in the helm with the captain and Tethys—that's far easier to contemplate than the idea that they are watching me, hiding out in the dark pools on the ground and watching me. I scratch my head bandages thinking about it.

"Touch down in five minutes," Capital Lessels says, over the intercom, and I jump as their voice crackles throughout the mess. "Coming in hot to thwart planetary sensors, would advise being buckled in." The static ends, and that makes me flinch too.

Heck and Dr. Garland don't seem like they're in any hurry to get somewhere safe for the landing. Dr. Garland picks up all of his equipment and stows it carefully back into his bag, taking the time to put each syringe back into its pocket.

Heck taps his fingers on the table. "Landing is nothing special," he tells me, as though it's a secret. "You have to find something and hold on tight."

I must look very frightened, because Heck smiles, a big and goofy grin.

"Come off it," he says, "haven't you landed et Lunam before? It's like that."

I shake my head. "We weren't allowed. Off planet," I clarify, when Dr. Garland looks at me, frowning. "Anni went et Ares once, because Mother said she should, but we never went anywhere else."

Dr. Garland shakes his head, zipping up his bag carefully. "You'd think being the children of a Governor would give you special privileges, but it seems like ya'll were stuck in that dome. Come on, let's get you strapped in." He nods his head, and I clamber out from the mess bench, and I follow him down the stairs to the cargo bay, Heck clattering along behind us.

He's right. If Annika is in the tenth encampment by herself, she'd be the second farthest away from home that she's ever been. If she can do it, I can do it too. I steal myself and clench my fists at my sides, listening to my footsteps echo off the sloped walls of the hallway.

Dr. Garland shows me a bank of seats that I haven't seen before, tucked into the side of the cargo bay. They're bucket seats, with a deep curve at the bottom. He settles me into one and helps me pull the straps from over my head, buckling them so that they are in an 'x' shape over my chest, and pulls a strap up from the bottom of the seat and over my lap. I am pressed snugly against the plastic of the seat, like I have been put in an adult-sized swaddle.

"Doesn't that hurt your stomach?" Heck says, sitting in the seat next to me, strapping himself in the same way.

I freeze. Feigning a wince seems like it would have no purpose now, after the fact. I tighten the buckles over my stomach and I shrug. Dr. Garland says nothing, but he also doesn't look at me as he carefully straps himself into his own seat.

I am saved from elaborating further by the rattle of the *Enetai* as it hits the atmosphere. I don't know what I was expecting—I thought, perhaps, that there would be some rumbling as we entered Terra, but immediately it felt as though my bones were going to rattle apart. I hold onto the armrests of the bucket seats until the tips of my fingers have turned white. I hold on even as my teeth begin to chatter in my head. There was no need for the straps that crossed my chest, because I was pressed back into the seat with the force of a large palm. I make a noise, and it fluctuates from my lips.

I squeeze my eyes tight and pull my knees up to my chest, but that feels terrible. Having my legs out on the ground feels terrible too. I am being pulled apart in all directions, being pulled *downward* with a strength I have never felt before. I can't even lean forward and put my hands

on my knees because the straps are holding me upright. I press my teeth together and try not to scream.

And then it is done. The *Enetai* evens out, and although I can feel resistance in the way the ship rattles against the atmosphere that now surrounds us, my bones are no longer shaking. I can breathe again, my chest is free from the pressure that was holding me. I rub my eyes.

“How did you like that?” Heck smiles at me with all of his teeth. He looks like he had the time of his life. “Any fun?”

Next to him, Dr. Garland groans and pulls himself up from his seat, looking decidedly peaked. “Only you ever think that’s any fun,” he says. His normally dark skin looks waxy and is covered in a sheen of sweat. “I should’ve brought a bag.” He stretches out his back, putting his hands in the crook of his spine and bending backwards. I hear a bit of a pop. “Oof,” he says, “I’m too old for this.”

“Hardly,” Heck says, unbuckling himself and springing up. “Need a hand, Adra?”

I don’t. I unbuckle myself and stand on wobbling legs. The *Enetai* groans under the new weight of the atmo around it, but neither Heck nor Dr. Garland seems concerned. My stomach swoops as the ship comes in towards the land, and then there is a gentle rattle as the ship lands on solid ground, a shudder that runs through the whole metal of the cargo bay, and up through my legs. Heck smiles at me, still all teeth.

“Are you ready?” he asks me.

I don’t know how to answer that. “Don’t we need masks?” Despite all that talk about the atmosphere, I am still not particularly convinced.

Heck only laughs.

The crew assembles in the cargo bay, Tethys and Dys holding space apart from each other. Tethys hovers near me, their colors orange and pink and rapidly changing. I can see the changing eddies in their outer valence, see through their cloud into the thin and small being who is huddled up inside. I smile at them, and they smile back, but their gaze is intense upon me.

Dys, I cannot make out clearly, and I do not wish to look at.

Captain Lessels claps her hands together. “Alright, my dears. And Adrastea.” She nods to me. “Let’s keep somewhere below the level of rowdy.” She looks at Heck significantly when she says this. “Let’s make sure that we all get along and make nice, even if that pains you. Adra, this is a particularly fame hungry group, if you know what I mean, and they’ll know who you are off the bat. So you might want to—” she gestures with her index finger to her own head, indicating to my gauze and the spot on my head that was shot off. “Keep it covered.”

I blush from my chin all the way up to my roots, and I don’t look at Dr. Garland and I don’t look at Tethys and I look at my feet on the floor instead, because that’s the safest place. I nod, once, the humiliation flowing up over the back of my neck.

“Alright!” Captain Lessels claps her hands together. “Dys, if you would—”

The hatch to the back of the ship lowers, the hydraulics in the lift creaking as the gate swings downward. My first impression is that we have landed in a stadium with all of its lights on, or in a biodome during midday, because the light is so bright it blows everything out to a sheet of white. I throw my hands up over my eyes. Around me, the rest of the crew blinks and squints, but no one has the same reaction.

The ramp lowers so that it touches the ground, and as it descends, I can make out the shadows of tall, imposing structures clustered right around us, casting shade up to the door of the *Enetai*. They are tall and straight, and as we file out of the ship in a line, I realize that they are

trees, like the broadcasts I have seen about the destruction of Terra. My breath catches in my throat. I didn't think they existed anymore. In the broadcasts, they were always burning. I take my hands away from my eyes and cup them around my eyes so that I can see, narrowing my range of vision to try and block out as much light as possible.

We are in a space between the trees, a clearing that is wide enough for the *Enetai* to land. It looks like there are a few other ships on the ground too, but they are covered over by large sheets so they sort of blend into the ground. Below my feet is the actual ground, full of dirt. I stub my toe at it. I wonder how far the dirt goes, or if there is a layer of concrete directly below us. Probably not. The thought makes me a little dizzy. I have never not stood on reinforced ground before.

The sun overhead is bright and terrible. There are tears beading in the corner of my eyes, and when I strain even to look at the ground, I am overwhelmed by the detail, by the thousand reflections of light over the grasses. There are grasses bending and waving throughout the whole clearing, almost up to my waist. There is a hum that crowds over the air, a low drone that sounds like a machine, but the silent *Enetai* is the largest piece of machinery around. I can't see too much detail in anything, aside from the dark shapes around the clearing and the tall shadows cast by the trees.

"Doing alright?" I can't see Captain Lessels except for her smile. The sun is so bright that the features of her face have blended together.

"It hurts," I say, squinting.

Heck laughs, and Tethys floats over next to me, arranging themselves in a column in front of me, partially blocking out the light. Because they are not fully dense, they do not cast me completely in shade, but they screen me so I can take my hands away from my face. *It's*

disconcerting the first time, Tethys says, and their voice is pitched so only I can feel it. *Don't let him laugh at you.*

I follow the crew, under the guidance of Tethys, towards the trees, trying to place each foot steadily in front of each other, without drifting off too much to the side. My bandage grows itchy, the heat of the sun making my skin crawl, but we step quickly under the shade of the trees. There is a narrow path that has been carved out through the woods, and although the ground here is full of sticks and parts of trees that have grown out rudely onto the ground, it is easier to walk here because I can see where I am putting my feet.

Careful, small one, Tethys says, bending their cloudy body down to me. *Keep your wits about you for Kerr.*

Before I could ask what they mean, they are swanning forward through the dim light, dancing in the rays of light that escape through the trees, turning a deep tangerine as they race ahead of us. I can't help but gawp as they move lithely through the air.

"Have you never seen the sun before?" In front of me, Heck's voice sounds like he's joking, but his question is serious.

"I have, but—" I shake my head. It is nicer to think about home than to think about here. I make the shape of a dome with my hands and press it to my forehead, but have to stop to concentrate on the ground in front of me. "The outside of the structure is supposed to deflect the UV radiation from the sun, which means that the light doesn't refract like this. And there are panels on the outside that collect the energy. We only see the sun itself, and I guess it provides some light, but never this much." The forest around us is deep and dark, and sunlight only penetrates through the canopy. "Mostly we have sunlamps."

Heck shakes his head. "That seems stupidly counterproductive."

“It’s not. I mean, it’s a bit circular, but it means that nothing gets in if it isn’t supposed to. The ultraviolet is why you’re all brown and splotchy on your arms, isn’t it? If you’re out in an unprotected atmosphere, the sun has been shaping you before you were born, and you don’t even know it.” A small thing alights on my arm and I slap it, startled when the thing explodes into red and black against my skin. I stifle a scream.

“That’s not a bad thing, though.” Dr. Garland is walking in front of Heck, even, but I can almost see a frown in the way his head is tilting. “I mean, sure, UV causes some skin cancers and general skin damage, but the energy that’s from the sun is vital to providing vitamins and hormones that your body needs. It helps grow plants, it helps regulate the temperature and the environment. The benefits to living in a false environment are superficial at best and detrimental on average. Not only detrimental to you—”

“*You* live in a false environment, though.” I don’t mean to sound argumentative, but it’s not right for him to just *tell* me what is right. My family left for a reason, my ancestors left so that Annika and I could live. People don’t just leave their homes unless things are terrible, dire. “You live your whole life on the *Enetai*. You don’t even have sunlamps there.” More creatures begin to land on me, and I notice they land on Heck too. He slaps the back of his neck and the side of his face as we are walking.

Dr. Garland turns while he is walking. “You don’t really know what we do,” he says.

I want to argue with that, but I bite my tongue and continue walking, slapping myself every couple of steps to rid myself of the constantly descending bugs. Those wouldn’t be allowed to survive in an artificial biome, which is all the argument I need.

Chapter 15.

By the time the trail ends, my legs are aching, and I have been touched all over by the small things in the air. I am sodden through with sweat and there is a stabbing pain in my knees up through my thighs. The trail has led us into a small clearing, still shaded by the canopy, that is crowded on the outside with tents, and a big pit of ash in the middle. What looks like a stage with another tent on the top of it dominates the top of the clearing. There are electrical wires roped between trees, bare bulbs hanging off of them.

“It’s only been fifteen minutes,” Heck says, looking at the rough shape I’m in.

Captain Lessels clicks her tongue looking at me. “I’m sorry, Adrastea, I didn’t even think about the gravity, I’m sorry.”

I try to push sweaty strands of hair out of my face and keep my back up straight. I try not to pant as I answer her. “It’s okay.”

Dys has completely disappeared into the background, and that makes me nervous. I stay as far into the middle of the clearing as I can, where it is lightest, afraid that Dys is watching me in the darkness. My eyes keep straying to the large tent. Is that where they’re keeping Annika? It seems like the most likely place. All of the other tents are empty.

“Maybe they’re out on maneuvers,” Dr. Garland says, walking across the empty yard, his bag slung over his shoulder. Captain Lessels follows behind him, Tethys floating in a halo around her head. Heck waits for me to catch up to them, and we walk across the small clearing together. I clench my hands together as we approach the tent, almost unable to breath with anticipation.

Captain Lessels throws back the curtain that acts as the door of the tent, and we all follow her inside. I take a deep breath before I enter—my heart is singing out for my sister—and I duck underneath the tarp into the dark, close tent.

I have to blink to readjust my eyesight to the gloom. Tethys is the brightest light in the space, still hanging directly behind Captain Lessel's head and making it difficult to look directly at her. There is a table that takes up most of the middle of the front part of the tent. A man sits along the far side of it with his feet propped up, a pipe hanging out of his mouth with smoke puffing out of it. He is reading some tab, and the screen is lighting up his face, illuminating the crags and lines that stripe through it. He looks up as we enter, and brings his feet off the table, nodding in a business-like manner at us.

"Lessels," he says, his mouth still around his pipe. "Glad to see you here. I thought you weren't coming."

Captain Lessels' lips are pressed tightly together. "Kerr. Excuse the delay. We ran into complications."

"Complications?" The man at the table looks at me, and gestures his pipe in my direction. "You've picked up the package you were sent to find. Miss Ierde, it's a pleasure to have you join our cause." He smiles at me, tightly.

The man is old enough to be my father and half again. He is wiry and tall, clearly born in exogravity, but the sag on his face is enough for me to know that he has been et Terra for enough time to be pulled downward. He is wearing a historic-looking military uniform similar to Captain Lessels', with epaulets and many more ribbons than she has crowded around his breast. He recognizes me too, probably mostly from the broadcasts. Should I recognize him too? His face is unfamiliar. I nod, hesitantly, trying not to betray my unclear recollection.

“Why didn’t you tell us we were sent for the governor’s child?” Captain Lessels says. It is less of a question and more of a demand phrased nicely.

“It all worked out. Lieutenant Kerr.” The man introduces himself, stretches out his arm magnanimously towards me. “I look forward to working with you, Miss Ierde.” I realize his arm is not magnanimous, but expectant. “Have you brought the information with you?”

I look at Heck. I look at Dr. Garland. They are looking at me. “Did I—did I *have* information with me?” My voice is almost a whisper. Had I brought something on the ship with me? Had I dropped it after Heck shot me? Everything around that whole week previous was fuzzy, from before I left the house to seeing Heck standing on the ramp.

“Are you saying that I sent my best people to pick you up, at your bequest, and you have no information for me?” Kerr’s face is wrinkled. When he frowns it becomes twisted.

I bristle. “Of course I have information with me.” I have four years of reclamationist activity on the moon, four years of my mother’s movement— but none of that is *with* me, unless Annika is here too. I pull myself up to my full height so I can look the man in his furrowed eyes. “Excuse me, I’m sorry to interrupt, but you have my sister here, right?”

“Your sister?” He takes a step back, his head brushing against the slope of the tarp. “Your sister is dead. What is this, Hanna?” He gestures his hand at me, and it’s a dismissive gesture. “I talked to her last week and she had *all* of her faculties in order, now she doesn’t have my information, and she’s asking me if her dead sister is *here*?”

Why wouldn’t Annika be here? I wrack my brain. I called him last week? We didn’t talk about Annika then? I can’t remember.

“I don’t know. There was—a brain injury,” Captain Lessels is scratching her arms, almost as a nervous reaction. Tethys is churning around her head, orange and gold and magenta. Next to me, Heck shuffles, looking at his feet.

“We were hopeful that no damage had been done,” the captain continues, “Her brain function seemed mostly normal when Jack performed tests. But now, perhaps—”

“What sort of brain damage?” Kerr rounds on Dr. Garland, his white eyebrows pulling in over his crumpled face.

“I was shot. In the head.” I step forward, into his line of sight. My stomach is pressed against the table. It’s a small room, but I want to get as physically close to this man as possible, so he has to look into my face and dismiss me. “Where is my sister? I know I sent her here. I *know* I needed her to come here, I must’ve sent her ahead of me—Where are you keeping her?”

“Adra.” Captain Lessels sounds exasperated, like she is talking to a small and stupid child. She puts her hand on my shoulder, as though to hold me back. “Your sister is dead. Her funeral was publically broadcast. Your sister can’t be here, she’s dead.”

I open my mouth to protest, but Dr. Garland cuts me off.

“No, Hanna, she’s not dead.” Garland’s voice is astringent, stinging. The tension across his arms has moved to his shoulders, to his jaw which is working furiously as he stares at Kerr. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. Neither of them have been *able* to die —”

It is true. Neither Annika nor I were able to die.

Something inside of me has been dead for a very long time. The blood rushes forward into my head, into my palms. My legs wobble underneath me. Everything sounds too far away, as though I am watching the tent through a tunnel. Captain Lessels reaches out to put her hand over my back, and I can feel the heat of her palm through my shirt before she pulls it away.

“Shit,” Heck says. The words sound like they are traveling through water. “You mean, she’s been mutated with exo genes?”

I flounder, trying to refill my lungs, and it occurs to me that I haven’t been breathing.

There is a crash, and Kerr is maneuvering around the table, his gun pointed at my head. He grabs my arms and bends them back behind my body. I cannot stop him. My body is being pulled through molasses.

Tethys is all agitation above me. Heck shouts belligerently. I wiggle against his hands, throw my head back against his overpowering arms, but my squirming is ineffectual.

“Come on,” the lieutenant says, pulling me out from underneath the tarp. There are men in a crowd in front of the tent, and I blink to see them. Kerr pushes me off the platform and onto the ground. I am forced to my knees. I can feel the sticks digging into my skin through the denim of my jumpsuit. Boots form a semi-circle around me, penning me in, but I cannot see faces, only knees. I do not know when the men appeared, but they are here now, and they stare at me, as silent and unwitting as the trees.

“Annika—” I say, twisting so that I’m looking over my shoulder. Dr. Garland and Heck are crowded in the doorway to the tent, panic in their eyes. They are frozen in place. Captain Lessel’s shadowed head is behind them, stiff in the darkness. I understand the war that is happening in their hearts. Should they be silent *now* to support the reclamationist movement, to support their people? Or should they speak. For me.

The crew of the *Enetai* are their own crowd behind me, standing off against the nameless, faceless group that stands in front of me. I am bookended between two groups of unmoving figures, both staring at me, staring at each other.

Let her go, Tethys says, flitting forward. Although I cannot see their outer valence in the sun, I can feel their voice in my stomach, feel a bit of electricity down my spine as they race around me. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the shadow of their innerbody twisting in the light beams, their long fingers stretching for me, but unable to touch me. *She has done **nothing** to you*. Their voice is emphatic, rattles my lower ribs.

“She’s an abomination,” Kerr spits. “Worse than your sort.” He kicks his foot ineffectually at Tethys who skirts around the toe of his boot in a glimmer. I can feel his weapon at the base of my neck, and I shudder from it, although I have no reason to flinch anymore. “Her bitch of a mother, her *bitch* of a mother.” A wad of his phlegm lands over my shoulder.

“My sister—” I look up, desperately, trying to find a sympathetic face in the crowd around me, but all I can see are the homogeneous faces of young men who stare at me blankly, unknowingly.

“Come on, Dietlev.” Dr. Garland’s voice is loud, but still far away. I can’t turn my head to see any of them. “You can put the gun down, she’s done nothing wrong—”

My sister is not here.

Kerr makes a noise in the back of his throat. I look up, instinctively, and my face meets a familiar one in the crowd. Wide eyes, with deep brown curls. A nose that could be found on statues et Terran, long before the fall. His lips are twisted into a sneer, the corner of his nose tucked buried in a crease of his cheek. Almost like disgust. I reach out to him, but before my fingers are outstretched—

The pressure of Kerr’s weapon is removed from the back of my neck, and there is a sudden flash of pain in the back of my skull, a reflex that my dead body has not yet been able to

forget. I feel myself falling forward, my hands out in front of me as I hit the ground, but my eyes are closed before I get there.

Chapter 16.

Sofia was having a party. Sofia was always having a party. Her parents were always gone, so her house was always lit up at night, with music spilling onto the sidewalk and the drunk forms of teenagers and young adults draped over the marble statuary in the front of the yard. That was where Annika had gone when she had climbed out of my room -- one night of debauchery to really thumb it to our mother, or maybe she had really wanted to get wasted. She had never really talked about that night after.

I hadn't been to Sofia's house before. Maybe Vassa had, but after, I didn't have the chance to ask him. He met me on a street corner close to my house when I called him for backup.

We crossed the yard, which was spotted with articles of clothing -- jackets, mostly, from partygoers who had gotten too hot and thrown their clothes from themselves -- and some people who were lying together, staring up at the roof of the biodome. They greeted us as we went past, with no sort of alarm. They waved at me in a sort of slow motion while I charged past them, leaving footprints on the turf.

We went into the kitchen through the backdoor. The counters and the table were full of half-empty cups and plates with bits of food on them, but the kitchen itself was mostly empty. Only Andreas was sitting at the table with his head in his hands, and he looked up when I walked in. "In there," he said, and he pointed through a door.

I didn't need to ask any other questions. Vassa and I burst through the door into what was a living room, or maybe a sitting parlor -- there was a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling and the furniture I could see was covered in velvet. The carpet was plush, almost as plush as the turf. Most of the room was obscured by the large circle of people who had formed, directly in the

middle of the room, blocking all lines of sight. I could only see their backs. Through the fence of their legs, I could see someone lying prone on the carpet.

Maybe I shrieked, because all faces turned to us. I was prepared to elbow my way into the middle, but the crowd parted easily for me, letting me in to see my sister. I dropped to my knees next to her, immediately cradled her head and brought it to my lap. Annika was in a bad way. Her head was thrown back against the carpet, the shirt she had been wearing when she left rucked up around her middle. Her eyes, normally dark and penetrating, stared up at the ceiling. A trail of vomit led from her mouth, down her cheek, to a pool dried on the carpet.

“We could call Emergency,” someone suggested tentatively above me.

We all knew my mother. “No Emergency,” I said, and I pulled my sister’s head up my body so that it was resting against my shoulders. “Not here.” I wasn’t strong, but Anni wouldn’t be heavy. I put my arm under her back, under her legs, and as I stood a flash went off.

One picture. One picture exists of the worst night of my life. I closed my eyes and stumbled towards the front door, the sea of people parting again. It was an eerily quiet room. The only noise was Vassa, shouting abuse at anyone else who was thinking of taking a picture.

I almost fell down the front stairs and then the front path, where partiers were still drowsing in the turf. Vassa was next to me, talking fast and loud. I could tell he was itching to take Anni from my arms. “Someone should’ve done this twenty minutes ago,” he was saying, “gotten her somewhere safe and called Emergency then, I can’t believe what those stupid assholes were thinking --”

It was intolerable. In the light of the streetlamps, in the blue hue of the night, I could see that he had run his hands through his hair, giving him the look of a mad scientist. His young face was pulled together and pale and he was worrying at his younger lip the way he used to do when

we were children. He was handsome in the way young men are handsome before they finally become the person they are meant to be.

My heart broke for him, and I think maybe for me too. And maybe for Annika, but I was too selfish to know how to mourn my sister yet. “Go home Vassa,” I said, and my voice was tired, even to me. “It’s over.” I looked at my sister’s face and saw her stir in my arms, the sort of movement someone makes when they’re not quite awake, not quite asleep.

“What’s over? I’ll bring her home with you, we can make sure she throws it all up--”

“No.” Nothing would be worse. “Go home. I’ll see you-- I’ll see you,” I said, and I rearranged the weight of my dead sister against my stomach, and I clung to her as I made my way up the street, clinging tightly to her, holding onto her so tightly that when I woke up the next morning I still had the imprint of the seam of her shorts along my arm.

Chapter 17.

I open my eyes and I cannot see the trees anymore.

I am in a large box that is roughly the size of a room. All the walls around me are an ashy gray, and they connect to each other at right angles. The floor is made of corrugated metal, as are the walls, and the ridges dig into my back. At the end of the room there is a hole in the metal roof, where a ray of sunlight falls through to illuminate a pile of fallen leaves and debris. I have been twisted around, my legs thrown askance. If it weren't for the insistent tug of gravity, I wouldn't know which way was up.

I touch the top of my head, and expect my fingers to come away sticky, but there is nothing. Someone has ripped away my head bandages, and my fingers skim easily over the gray pseudo-skin that covers half of my skull. There has been something wrong with me since Heck shot me, and I have known it the whole time, but I thought—

I thought that if I didn't think the thought, it couldn't hurt me. But it is here, and it lives inside of me. I do not feel hunger, do not feel the need to sleep. I do not fill my lungs with air. I hardly feel as though I even *am*. On the *Enetai*, I became the blank slate of myself, erased until I could not remember the week preceding my death.

If I keep still now, which is all I want to do, I can hear wind whipping around the outside corners. My ears can hear easily what I could not perceive before. Without even straining myself, I can hear the voices of young men and the clanking of utensils against tin plates. I can hear far-away sounds of animals' footsteps, can hear what has to be air moving against the leaves.

But I cannot hear my own heartbeat. Have I become immune to the sound? Do I no longer have one? I pick up my hand and I press my palm against my ribs, but I feel nothing, not even the gentling thumping of blood in my wrist.

Where is she? If she isn't here —where is she?

The ceiling of the long and narrow room wavers, and I can see the outline of a door against the corrugated metal, made out of rust and dripping water. I blink, but I cannot tell if it is real or not. The darkness swims in front of me, and I cannot reach out into it, cannot remember why I was so worried to begin with.

When I curl my fingers, in the dark, it is my sister's hand that squeezes back.

Chapter 18.

My mother placed her hand on my head and traced her finger down my cheek. I was sitting on a table in my mother's office, my chubby, childish legs swinging over the side. My mother smiled at me. She held my upper arm tightly. Her light hair was pulled back, and there were small wrinkles at the sides of her eyes.

"Are you alright, darling?" my mother asked me. Her eyes were brown, and her mouth was a smile. "You have always looked like your father. Like he spit you out." She is wearing gloves, blue plasti. The light overhead is dim. I hadn't been allowed to go into her office before.

"Mommy?" I asked her.

She pressed a cold wipe to my upper arm, vigorously scrubbing at the skin. "Yes, dear?"

"What will I be when you grow up? Will I grow up and be like you, like Anni will be?"

"No," Adrastea." My mother smiled, and I could see her teeth. They were lovely and white and all the same size. She held my gaze as she put a plasti stick between her teeth and tugged, pulling the cap off of a long needle. "You'll get to be whatever you want to be."

She lined up the syringe and placed it into the top of my arm and pressed down, so that the metal brokes my skin. I felt the hot sting of a foreign liquid enter my body, felt it like a heat being poured into my body. I cried out, but she didn't stop.

"You will always get to be whatever you want to be," she told me as I screamed, pressing her lips to my forehead. "Neither of you will ever have to worry."

Chapter 19.

The metal floor of the long box that they've thrown me in is cold against the back of my head. I close my eyes, but I cannot stop seeing.

After Annika's funeral, Vassa threads his way through the crowd and comes up to my family. My mother doesn't even look at him, but he sticks out his hand to me. "Goodbye," he says, in a way which means *goodbye forever*.

I don't ask him any questions. I shake his hand with more warmth than fitting at my own sister's funeral. "Goodbye." I am full of relief. It had been two nights since we had gone to get Annika's body from the floor of Sofia's party, a week and a half since we broke up, and that time I have become a different person, one I don't need Vassa complicating.

"Goodbye," he says again, and it looks as though he wants to say something else, but his mother is there with her fingers in his shoulder and she's pulling him along the aisle. I thought, at the time, that they were relocating biodomes so that Vassa wouldn't be implicated in my sister's death. Later, I realized that maybe he had finally gone on his mission. Either way, I heard nothing else from him.

I pulled Annika from the floor of Sofia's party, and I cradled her in my arms and I brought her down the streets. Lying in this long room, the roof of my mouth tastes like copper wire. My arms lie out on either side of me, as though I have become an angel. My body feels stiff. I do not try to move myself from the twisted position I was tossed in. The light no longer peers in beams through the hole in the corner, and instead is diffused gently above me.

The air around me has chilled noticeably. I think perhaps that I should move so that the corrugation does not make a permanent dent in my spine, but I do not have the will to do so. I

feel like my sister, on the night that I brought her home. She must've been paralyzed too, weighed down by everything unsaid. I hadn't even asked her.

I had brought Annika home and I told Lovey to call my parents down from their bedroom, that it was an emergency. Lovely did. My parents weren't happy to be woken up, but when they saw what had happened to Annika, they were furious.

"She's dead," my mother spat, like it was my fault. I couldn't answer. She was right, I hadn't been fast enough.

"I don't know," I said. I put Annika on a couch in our sitting room, and I drew all the curtains just in case there happened to be cameras outside. I didn't expect them to be here this fast, but I had grown up around an overabundance of caution. "Her eyes keep opening."

My mother moaned, low and terrible. She stumbled over her own feet, her dressing gown tangling around her ankles as she crossed to the couch, sinking to her knees in front of my sister. She wailed again, there were no tears. Instead, her jaw was clenched hard enough that her teeth might've shattered. I hovered near the couch, but I did not want to get close to either of them, did not want to break against the rocks of my mother's grief.

In the doorway, in his pajamas, my father hesitated. "Should we call someone?" he asked. He looked as though he was about to start biting his cuticles.

"No." My mother was curt. "This is a family matter." She rubbed a circle over Annika's chest. For a second, I thought she was trying to get my sister's heart beating again, to restart her blood flow.

A family matter. When my sister's eyes opened again, they were not her usual dark and lovely brown. They were feverish, electric blue, and they stared unfocused at the ceiling. This Annika was the exact opposite of my put-together, clean-cut sister, with vomit trailing from the

corner of her lips and dried into her hair. It almost struck me that she was truly dead, that it was just her body blinking back at me.

I am staring in that same way at the corrugated ceiling now. I can feel my eyes dry out as I stare at the ends and dips of the metal above me. I want to inhale, but the air is so cold, and my mouth is so dry. I think of my own newly blue eyes, staring back at me from the mirror.

If Annika were to come and find me now, what would she see?

Still pressed against my sister's chest, my mother sniffled dryly. "It was a failsafe," she said, holding her oldest daughter's hands in hers, her back towards me. I hadn't asked, hadn't been able to find the words, but she answered me anyway. "I never wanted—I never thought that this would happen to either of you girls. I just wanted you to be safe."

"Helene." My father was still hovering by the entranceway to the living room, his hands fiddling with the empty air in front of him. "We don't have to do this. There's a way to—"

"No!" My mother's voice was already raw. "I chose this for her. *I* chose this for her, and I have to handle it." She rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. It was a young gesture. "When you were little, when you both were little, I gave you a—a medicine so that you would never be sick, so that you wouldn't die young. But if the death isn't perfect, and if the body starts to decay before the medicine activates, then ..." She trailed off, cradling Annika's jaw in her hand.

I tried to exchange a look with my father, but he was staring off into middle distance, his eyes blank, his face gray.

"She'll be okay," my mother said, rubbing my sister's face. "She'll wake up, and then we'll have Annika back, just how she was before."

My father stepped forward, hesitantly, his arm outstretched as though he was going to put his hand on his wife's shoulder. "She'll never be back to the way she was, Helene. The moment she steps out in public, everyone will know. Everyone will know what we've done."

"What *medicine*?" I was still in the middle of the living room, adrift.

"It's not a medicine." My father looked only at Annika. "It was something else."

"It was a mutation. I took genetic material from an exoterrestrial we found in a mining outpost out beyond the Belt. It was a consolidation of resources." My mother's voice does not waver. "We couldn't keep a prisoner of war, it would've been better if the *thing* died, and the best way to get rid of them is to strip them of parts."

I gasp, unable to help myself, and put my hand to my arm, to the site of the shot she had given me when I was a child, the one that had made me sick for a week. "You filled me with *exo* parts?"

Mother shrugged, her face still taugth with grief, her hand still on my sister's face. "You'll live forever," she said, and her voice was distant. "Both of you."

Annika sat up before I could reply. She sat up quick enough that she knocked Mother off of her chest, startling all of us. She put her hand to her head and looked between the three of us, blinking as though she were in a dream. "Mom?" she asked. "Ads?" Every time her eyes closed, I made the mistake of thinking that they would open again to be brown.

I close my eyes. Do I have a headache? I don't think I do. The metal rubbing of the metal in my head against the metal of the floor feels a little bit like chewing on a penny. I would press my fingers to my temples if I had the energy, but I don't, so I lie still. The shadows in the corners grow longer, and if I listen too hard, I can hear a door slowly creak open.

20.

Where has she gone?

Chapter 21.

I cannot get comfortable, but I do not try to do so. I lay like a ragdoll against the wall. In the still and quiet I can hear a moan of noise outside the walls, the same low and monotonous drone from earlier that comes from a hundred different places at once. I do not know how long I have laid on this floor, and I do not know if it is meaningful to assign a length of time to this. In the back corner, the shadows have only grown longer. The outline of the door wavers in the corner of my eyeline, and I cannot help but think that someone is pounding on the other side, banging their fists against the thin metal panel.

I know who is on the other side of the door.

There is no way for her to sneak into my bed tonight, no way for her to push through the door and make her way across the hallway. I know that she is crying on the other side of the threshold, but there is now way to let her in.

The floor remains cold.

Chapter 22.

After Annika died, she became a stranger in her own body. My mother hated her piteously. The first weekend after Annika's funeral, Mother called us all to a family dinner, but Annika didn't want to come. Since her death she had been sitting anxiously in my bedroom, staring in a mirror, fixated on her new eyes. Her speech and thoughts had become estranged.

When I was able to coax her downstairs, she sat woodenly in her typical seat with a plate in front of her. She said nothing and she ate nothing.

"Just try something," Mother told Annika, pushing a plate of food closer to her. "Come on, just a bite."

I don't remember what we were eating. I wasn't having anything either. I was watching my mother with tight lips.

"You haven't eaten anything in days," my mother said again, pushing the plate with the tips of her fingers towards my sister. Any further, she would have pushed the plate off the table into Annika's lap.

Annika said nothing. She was staring directly at a position over our father's head, watching the crown molding. She blinked only when she remembered to.

"You could try a bite," our father suggested. He was the only one eating vigorously. He would not have attended Annika's funeral if our mother had not tugged him out the front door. "You're worrying your mother."

Our mother's worry was the least of Annika's. "I'm not hungry," she said, eventually.

"You have to be hungry." Our mother's tone brooked no argument. "You haven't eaten in a very long time, you have to keep up your strength. You've gone through a tremendous shock, and you have to look after your body. You can't just *not* eat."

I don't know that my mother understood what had happened to Annika. Of course, she understood the biological answer, that Annika had been transmuted, that she had *become*. But she didn't understand what else happened, that her daughter in front of her would never truly be her daughter again. Our mother was not strong enough to build a bridge across this unfathomable chasm of grief.

Annika shook her head. She didn't move her eyes from the position on the wall.

"Come on." My mother leaned over the table, grabbed my sister's hand, and forced a fork into it. She wrapped her hand around Annika's finger, and began to move their arms in tandem, dragging my sister's hand along with her. "Dinner," Mother said, as though she were teaching a toddler. Still puppeting my sister, she put the forkful of food into her mouth.

Annika's mouth didn't open. The food was pressed impotently against her lips.

My mother, leaning over her plate, the edge of the table digging into the buttons of her collared shirt, forcing the fork against my sister's welded mouth. She tried again and again, pushing the contents of the fork above Annika's chin. "Come on, damn it!" My mother dropped the fork and it clattered to the floor. She took a finger-grab full of food and pressed it against my sister's mouth, covering her lips in mashed-up food. "Eat!"

Annika's face didn't move. When my mother's hand fell away, Annika's chin and nose were stained white and gray and brown.

My mother screamed. She was sitting so that one of her knees was in her chair, her hair falling limply around her face, her cheeks red. "Listen to me!" she shouted again. Her voice bordered on hysterical. She grabbed another handful from her own plate, sauce dripping down her wrist. "Damn you, listen to me!"

My father had stopped eating. He was staring at the other end of the table with an unnameable emotion written across his face. “Helene,” he said. “Helene, stop.”

At his words, my mother stopped, fell back into her chair. The blood rushed out of her cheeks, and she sat heavily, trembling. We, the three of us still breathing, looked at each other. Mother took her napkin and wiped the food off of her hand and onto the table, making a small pile on the tablecloth. She swallowed.

“Excuse me,” she said, after a moment. She pushed her chair away from the table. It made a terrible noise. She stood up. “I have to go wash.” She walked out of the dining room, the echo of each footstep filling up the whole room.

There was a long moment. My father put his face in his hands, his own dinner forgotten. He was a man defeated, at the head of his own table. “Adrastea, please help your sister wash up.”

I stood quickly and went around the table, helped my sister to her feet. I took her napkin and rubbed her face clean. I pulled a chunk of food from her nose.

“Has she stopped?” she asked me.

“She’s stopped. Come on, Anni.” I helped her out of the chair. She followed willingly, not even turning to say goodnight to our father, who remained alone at the head of the table.

Even then, my sister found it hard to keep in touch with the world around us. It got worse as the years passed. My sister was set adrift in the sea of her own mind. She was a ghost in her own body, in danger from our mother’s unseeing eyes just as much as she was in danger from our father’s incompetence. As she got sicker, I knew I needed to save her, know I had decided to send her away. I know I had spoken to Iyleen—

—but I cannot remember. Where did I hide my sister?

Chapter 23.

Light comes in through the hole in the ceiling. I can hear voices outside the metal walls. I refuse to move.

“He put her in here.” The voice is familiar. Familiar enough for me to recognize it, not enough for me to place the speaker. A man’s voice. “It was freezing overnight, I hope she’s—”

“She wouldn’t be.” Another familiar voice. One that is closer to me in time.

There is some scraping from the front of the metal room, the sound of metal on metal. It grinds on my ears, and I can’t help but to try and press the side of my head into the metal. There is the groan of rusted hinges, a heavy clanking. Two sets of heavy footsteps rattle the floor.

“Adra?” The second voice is cautious, and it echoes. His footsteps shake the leaves that have piled up underneath the hole in the ceiling. I watch the vibrations in the air.

A face appears in my line of vision. It is grimey and sweaty and hasn’t shaved in a few days. The forehead is boarded by a wide brimmed hat. The nose is crooked.

Heck’s face. It is just as animated as it was yesterday, or perhaps I’m remembering the day before that.

“Did you find her?” My voice is raspy and my chest is hollow.

“Nope, and we’re not going to find her if you keep lying around in here, you sad sack.” Heck puts his hands underneath my shoulder blades and tows me upwards until I am forced to stand on my own two legs. “Have you moved at all? You have stuff in your hair.” He brushes at my shirt, knocking off debris.

I look at the other man standing in the doorway. He is wearing muted brown and olive gray pants and a vest that is covered in pockets. There is a large gun over his shoulder, and I can see the butt of it over his head. His eyes are still dark, his cheeks are still rouged with anger. He

looks just how I remembered him looking, while at the same time looking just like the man I thought he would become. He's wearing a stupid headband with the icon et Terra sewn right over the forehead. He makes eye contact with me, but breaks it quickly.

"Are you ready to go?" he asks. Even the curve of his mouth looks just as it did when we were children. His face had been in the crowd of men, watching me in the dirt.

I take a step forward towards him, my legs unsteady. "Vassa?"

He glares at me, presses his finger to his lips. "Don't. We'll get caught." He points at Heck. "Tae, grab her arm, don't let her stumble around." His orders are quick and efficient, his voice is low. He steps out of the box furtively, not looking behind him, not checking on me.

"*Christ*, he's such an ass," Heck mutters, looping his arm around my back. "Come on, lean on me. He's right, we don't have a lot of time before the shift changes. You know, you look pretty freaky without your bandage? Not in a bad way, more in a radical, kickass kinda way."

I put my weight on Heck and he helps me limp forward, out of the metal box and back out into the trees.

The box I have been in is in the middle of a thicket of forest. From the outside, I can see that the structure is probably twenty feet long and seven feet tall. It is painted a garish orange and is stained with rust. The ground outside is littered with dead leaves and broken sticks, making my steps unsteady. The trees that surround us are more of the tall and pointy kind, with a rough and peeling exterior.

We don't go back through the campsite, which I appreciate, because I don't want to see Kerr again. Instead, we go through the trees, into the darker parts of the forest in the opposite direction of the low hum of noise that lingers on the outskirts of my hearing. Vassa walks confidently through the underbrush, stopping to listen intently to the cracking stick and the

sounds of the small mammals around us. I take my weight off of Heck and keep on my own legs, even though they wobble unsteadily.

“Are there bears?” I ask. With my supersonic hearing, I can’t hear anything larger than us in the woods, but better safe than sorry.

Heck laughs. “No bears. The tenth would’ve eaten them already.”

Vassa looks back at me. His face is twisted, pained, but the expression is gone as soon as I see it. He beckons us closer to him using some sort of militaristic hand gesture. “If Kerr finds us out here, I will be shot for deserting and you, Adra, will be beheaded and your head will be delivered to your mother, so *please*—”

“Deserting?” Heck’s nose is wrinkled like he’s holding back laughter. “This isn’t a *military*—”

Vassa makes another hand gesture at him, presumably *shut up*, and he turns on his heel, leading us through the forest. I try not to step too loudly, just in case Vassa is right.

The litter underneath our feet is mostly made up of long, slender and dried needles and brittle stickers, so although I step carefully, I cannot step altogether silently.

The sunlight penetrates the upper layers of the forest in small spurts. The light that does break through casts beautiful patterns on the ground, but the rest of the forest is shrouded in shadow. Small bushes and brambles tangle our path. Vassa and Heck push through them, heedless of the thorns snagging on their clothes. I follow them clumsily. I do not have their bone density, nor their strength.

It is terrifying, also, to consider the animals around us. If I concentrate over the sound of Vassa and Heck’s pulses, which I am trying very hard to do, I can hear the light breaths of other creatures in the woods, hear small and foreign heartbeats. There are smallish things in the trees

that make gentle coos as we walk underneath. I am terrified. I have never been surrounded by this much life, never been surrounded by this much random and chaotic noise. I try to focus on walking, one foot in front of the other. I am concentrating so hard that I almost do not notice Vassa standing in front of me.

“Watch your step, Adra,” he says, and I startle. Vassa is standing over a gully, one of his hands outstretched to me. He looks just how I thought he would look when we were younger. I want to throw my arms around his shoulders, to hug him as tightly as I used to, to ask him to tell me that everything would be okay. Instead, I take his offered hand and let him pull me across the small stream.

I have never seen water that runs outside of pipes and taps before, but this gully is full of water that eddies and buffets in small pools beneath my feet. It doesn't take a big jump to clear the stream, but I hit the ground with relief. I can hear, now, the sound of the water over the sound of everything else, but if Vassa hadn't pointed it out to me, I would've fallen on my face.

Heck stands on the other side of the gully, his arms over his chest. “You good?” he asks.

I am not. I shrug.

I had not thought about the wildness of this planet, about all of the little perils that are tucked away in the sloping and rocky ground. The walk through the forest takes twice as long as it took to walk on the manicured path to the tenth encampment. Eventually, Vassa deems that we are far enough away from the tents that we can move quickly, and he hustles me along, even though my legs are screaming and my lungs burn. I have never walked so far in such high gravity before. I have never breathed air with such low oxygen content for such an extended period of time. I feel as though I am peeling apart. We keep moving forward, to the clearing where Heck has landed a small vessel.

It is a small gray craft, probably around the size of the box I just emerged from. A cloud-hopper. I've never seen one in real life, but in the broadcasts, Enforcers use them to travel between biodomes in order to intercept smugglers and arms dealers. Heck opens one of the doors near the front of the hopper, and I climb in gratefully. The cloud hopper is divided into two sections, the cargo bay in the back and two rows of passenger seats, which are worn and comfortable. Perhaps they are so comfortable because my legs hurt so deeply. I sink into them without a second thought.

The Heck and Vassa climb into the front, leaving me to spread out over the back row.

"Are you alright there, Adra?" Heck looks over his shoulder at me and smiles.

I smile back. I am swaddled in the comfort of the dark ship, and the revving of the engine fills the space with the comforting mechanical hum that I didn't realize I had been missing. I feel safe and small. I lean my head against the door of the hopper as the craft lifts off, shaking me gently as it rises off the ground, fighting against the gravity that keeps pulling us down. Heck is in his element too. His hands move expertly over the dials and he grips the wheel with the confidence of many years' practice.

In the co-pilot's seat, Vassa sits with a straight back, the nape of his neck and the back of his head the only part of him that is visible to me.

Chapter 24.

The week before Annika died, I was sixteen and I was in love.

Vassa and I were on the bed in my room. Annika's and my tent was built up in the corner, a hide away that was full of pillows and hidden from the camera by the sheet, but it felt childish to lie with Vassa in there. Instead, we were curled up on my bed, our feet tucked underneath us, our foreheads pressed together. I felt loved and cared for, warm flushing through my heart.

The moment was shattered when Annika knocked on the door. I could tell it was her by her footsteps, by the sureness of her knuckles against the door. She didn't usually knock. My heart sank.

I sat up suddenly, so that I was no longer against Vassa. "Come in!" I called. Still lying out on the bedspread, Vassa moaned.

Annika entered the room. She was wearing her pajamas and robe, her hair pulled up in her nighttime bun. She still had bits of mascara stuck on her eyelashes, and her brown eyes were focused only on me. I could tell by the set of her lips something was wrong. Ignoring Vassa, she stood at the edge of my bed, grabbing both of my hands. "Adra," she said, "We have to talk."

My stomach folded over on itself. "Okay."

Vassa sat up. "No you don't." He made a face at Annika. At the time, I couldn't read what emotion was on his face, but now I know it was betrayal.

"It's okay," I said, and I reached out my hand to touch his knee. He pulled away from me, his forehead twisting, his eyebrows bending down over his nose.

"Can you leave us alone?" he asked Annika. Usually, he didn't speak that way to Annika. Usually, he spoke to her gently, deferentially.

She ignored him. Annika was two years older than Vassa, and she wore her extra years like a crown. She focused her eyes on me. “He came to me this afternoon, while I was out smoking by the hedges.” She spoke with her back to the camera so Mother couldn’t see what she was saying. “He told me he loved me, and he would take me on a date if you weren’t here.”

I felt something sinking and nasty in the pit of my stomach. I had been punched through with a steel beam. I held my sister’s hand even tighter, held it so tightly I can feel the bones of her fingers shift underneath my palm. “Okay,” I said. I held her gaze tightly, and tried not to cry.

I had always known this about Vassa. All three of us had always known which sister he would choose, if Annika would give him the chance. He was only dating me to keep eyes on Mother, to keep tabs on her political movements as the head of the Senate and governor of Lunam—we all knew this, the whole community knew this—but if he had been able to choose a sister, he would’ve chosen Annika.

He just wasn’t supposed to say it out loud.

My heart settled heavily in my ribcage. I had been waiting for this, I think, the whole time. Waiting for us to say what all three of us knew what he was thinking. “Thank you, Anni.”

“Shut up.” Vassa lurched forward, protesting his innocence a moment too late. He stood up from my bed, and I fell back onto it, the shifting weight knocking me down. He stood face-to-face with my sister, his back to me. “Shut up, you don’t get to—”

“I don’t get to *what*.” Annika took a step closer to him. She was the shorter of the two, but with her nose almost pressed into his chin, she was the more intimidating. “I don’t get to tell my sister the truth?” She pushed her finger into his chest, and he took a step back.

I wanted to scream. This confrontation wasn’t about me. It had never been about me. It was about the two of them, the two of them and the power they could wield over me. I wanted to

throw my arms up into the air and drum my feet against the mattress. I wanted to yell and yell until someone listened to me, but instead I kept my arms still, breathing deeply enough to press the hurt all the way down into the bottom of my lungs.

“I’m so sorry, Ads,” Annika said. Her face was still pressed almost into Vassa’s chest. The room was so still that we could hear the filters change their tune, humming at a lower pitch. After another still minute, Annika turned on her heel and left my room, her bathrobe flapping after her.

Vassa looked down at me, then after her. And then he left too.

Chapter 25.

When the hopper lands, Heck comes around to the back door to help me out. I don't know how long we have been in the air, but my knees have locked up. It takes a moment for me to stretch my legs out and stand up, my muscles protesting. I put my hands behind my neck and press my fingers into my back.

"Are you okay?" Heck puts a hand underneath my elbow and helps me step down from the hopper to the ground.

"Just hurts." Out in the open air, I have to again fight the urge to ask for a gas mask. I know I have spent at least a full day and a half in unfiltered air, but the crisp coldness of what I'm breathing now feels as though it is tearing open my throat.

The et Terran atmosphere presses down on all sides of me. There are trees on the periphery of my vision, but what really holds my attention is the bigness of the open atmosphere stretching above my head like a biodome. The blue is hemmed in only the borders of the land that reach up to grasp it. From where we are standing by the cloud hopper, the ground slopes upward into the first hill I've ever seen in my life. It is covered with grass and wildflowers, and there is a small track up to the top.

"Welcome to the Homestead," Heck says, gesturing at the space around us.

I nod, but my face must show how small I feel on the inside.

"Don't look at me like that. I promise, it's more than just a hill." Heck says, and he laughs. "Come on. Are you ready to go, Seleznyov?"

Vassa steps from around the hopper. It is unbelievable that he is in front of me. Really here, and not another attempt of my imagination to make sense of a new and impossible world. He is standing awkwardly, at attention.

I try not to betray my own uncertainty. “Thank you for the rescue.”

He shuffles his feet and cannot look at me directly. “It’s all right,” he says. His voice is gruff. “It’s good to see you again.”

I can’t help it. I know that we didn’t leave on good terms, I know that I have been angry at him for four years. I shouldn’t be excited to see him, but I am. I throw my arms around him before I know what I am doing. He’s taken aback for just a second, but then I can feel his hands on my back, lightly, as though he is afraid to touch me.

“He, Ads,” he says into my hair. It sounds like he might cry.

“Hey,” I say, and my voice is sniffly too. “It’s good to see you too.”

Vassa lets me go too quickly, taking a step back. He wipes his eyes with the back of his hand and looks at me. “You look really different now,” he says, and his voice is clogged up. “Tae says that you, that you’re some kind of mutant? What the fuck, Adra?” He laughs, sort of watery, and gestures to his own head. “Absolutely wild.”

My hands fly up to the bald and silver part of my scalp, my fingers skimming across it. I turn back to Heck, who is watching us oddly. His arms are crossed over his chest.

“How well do you two know each other?” Heck’s forehead is wrinkled as he looks between the two of us.

Vassa starts. “We—”

“We were friends as kids,” I say, cutting Vassa off. “We used to be close.”

“We used to.” Vassa nods. He mirrors Heck’s position, crossing his arms over his chest.

The shape of Heck’s mouth could be mistaken for a smile. “Come on, Adra. Let’s get you up to the house.” He offers me his arm, and I take it gratefully. My legs are heavy and my whole body feels like it’s being pulled slowly down to the core of the planet. I had never imagined that

gravity would work like this. I hadn't realized that it would make me feel so heavy, pulled like taffy.

Heck helps me up the hill, going slowly. He gives me time to balance the weight of one of my legs in front of the other, to realign myself as the incline increases. His arm is warm against his side, his body is a comforting presence. I want to press my cheek against his shoulder and rest for just a minute, but he keeps moving forward.

Vassa walks slightly behind us. He pretends that he isn't looking at me, but when he slides his eyes in my direction, he's staring at me intently. I can feel the shape of his eyes on the back of my head. I know that he is staring at the bareness of my skull and how the silver grows right from my skin. I shiver under his scrutiny.

When we were younger, he used to tell me that I was beautiful.

Heck helps me prop my weight up a little more as we near the crest of the hill. The sky overhead is a dazzling color, so bright that it hurts to look at, but there are mountains that hem us in on all sides. As we near the top of the hill, I can see the land spread out behind us is clad in the same green, the same wildflowers that we are walking through. This hill is nestled in one end of the valley, and when I turn over my shoulder I can see a grassy expanse behind us, dotted with low buildings. Squares of the land quilt the ground, demarcated by hedges and fences. There are other cloud hoppers landed around the valley too, out of place against all the green.

It is a hidden place, one that has been gathered safely up in the folds of the mountains for a very long time.

I hold onto Heck's hand as he helps me take the final steps up to the top of the hill.

The crown of the hill is covered in the dark shade created by two giant trees which overhang a one-story house. The trees are bigger than the ones back at the tenth encampment,

and they swoop easily downwards towards the top of the house. Their outer skin isn't as rough either. There are knots and whirls on the trunk, and their leaves are broad. The grass here is dark and deep. If I kneel, the grass may swallow me up, cradle me.

The house that is buried in the shade is smaller than any other house I've ever seen. It is only one story tall, long and narrow. The windows are illuminated with a golden light, and outside is a long porch that is crowded with chairs and small tables. Flowers are planted around the yard, bursts of bright pink and blue against the dark and shaded green. It looks a bit like Heck's smile. Warm and welcoming, but still unfamiliar.

Captain Lessels is waiting for us, sitting in a chair on the porch, her legs propped up against the railing. She isn't wearing her usual jacket. Instead, her arms are bare and I see that she has black drawings etched into her skin. She smiles as she sees Heck and myself arm in arm, and her eyes are deep and teasing. "Well, hello," she says. Her mouth is wide and her teeth are white. "How was the trip?"

Chapter 26.

The Tae household is full of life. It holds so much for such a small building: people (Tethys and Dys included), plants, a small mammal with wiry hair that is running around on all fours and barking excitedly at anything it sees, a small mammal that hisses at me and hides under the table. I am overwhelmed from the moment I am ushered to the kitchen table. The kitchen itself is yellow and full of steam, with herbs growing from the walls, pots and pans spilling out of cabinets. Clutter is on every open surface. There are empty coffee mugs stacked on top of piles of actual books, a garden spade lying next to the sink.

Crowded in the room there is an older woman who looks like Heck, a younger boy, Dr. Garland, Tethys, Dys, and a young woman who I catch sight of leaving through the back door. The conversation is a low buzz punctuated by laughter.

As Heck bundles me through the door and into a chair, and the conversation comes to a halt. Dr. Garland jumps when he sees me, enthusiastically grabbing my hand. “There you are Heck! Adra, welcome, we hadn’t thought—” he stops suddenly when he sees Vassa trailing behind us, and he gives Heck a significant look.

I can feel Heck’s shrug as he helps me sit down. “He wanted to come,” he says.

I collapse gratefully. Vassa does look terribly out of place in the kitchen. Even Dys, looming in a corner, looks more at home in the cheerful and warm interior than Vassa does, with his combat fatigues and stained headband. In this golden light I can see how deep-set his eyes have become, how stained with dirt his face is. His gun is still on his back, and he stands at attention in the middle of the room.

“Ensign Seleznyov,” Dr. Garland says, a little awkwardly. “Have a seat.”

In the silent kitchen, everyone watches Vassa take his gun off his back, sit in a kitchen chair. He turns red under the scrutiny, but he refuses to make eye contact with anyone.

When he sits, it is like the room lets out a breath. Tethys zips over to me, moving so quickly their valence leaves a trail of gold behind them. *You're back!* they crow, delighted, and their voice reverberates through my bones. *I thought it would be forever until we saw you again!*

Vassa starts as Tethys nears him. He flinches, and looks away, pointedly not engaging. Instead, he studies what seems to be the real wood grain of the table.

"I'm back," I say to Tethys. Their delight is infectious, and the moment I see them I feel relieved, as though I have been holding my breath until I could see them again. "Thanks for sending along a rescuer."

Oh, I didn't send him. No one sent him. Tethys forms themselves into a small ball and hovers over the crowded table. I can see their giant eyes, see the way their long and spindly hands are pressed against their approximation of cheeks. *He went all by himself, he said—*

"That's enough of that," Heck says, gruffly, not looking at Tethys, but for a different reason than Vassa. He pulls out a chair next to me and sinks into it. "Adra, this is my mom, Elizabeth, and my brother, Jeremy." The two people in the kitchen smile at me and nod, and I realize that they do look uncannily similar to Heck. "My dad is probably out back, with the animals, and my sister— should be somewhere." He looks around, as though he's expecting her to reappear.

"You have an older sister?" That idea is charming.

"Younger," Heck says. "I'm the oldest."

"And the favorite," the younger man in the kitchen says. Jeremy. He smiles crookedly at Heck. They have identical smiles, lopsided and insinuating. Heck smiles back at him. My heart

could burst in my chest looking at them. Not from happiness, just a slanted sideways joy that tastes a little bit like bitterness.

“It’s lovely to meet you, dear,” Mrs. Tae says. The kitchen is small and cramped, but it bends to accommodate her. She’s a small woman, wearing an apron, with Heck’s blonde hair and streaks of white in her hair. Her cheeks are red when she smiles. “I have to say, when Heck told us that he was leaving to pick up a *governor’s* daughter—especially *you*. Well. I thought he was pulling my leg. It’s very lovely to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too—”

“Did you really get to meet Yu Chen?” Jeremy cuts me off. He isn’t really that much younger than Heck. His eyes are bright. He wears an apron too, and he has a slash of some light powder across the top of his cheeks. “Did you get to hear him sing in person?”

Did I? That seems like a long time ago. I frown. “I think I did.” I had gone to see a man sing in the town hall, and he had been very good. The music was really rock-and-roll, which Mother thought was a bad influence. She thought it was a good place to get photographed, though, so I had gone to make her happy. That had happened about a year after Annika’s death. “He was very kind, he shook my hand a lot.”

“I saw a picture of you two together in a broadcast,” Jeremy says. “I was so jealous, I wish *I* got to go see him. It’s pretty cool I get to meet you, though.”

I nod. I always forget that people can see the photographs taken of me. I forget that they were taken *so* other people can see me. It’s so strange other people were interested in seeing me, interested in knowing what I was doing and what I was wearing. It had never seemed interesting at the time.

Jeremy is unaware of my crisis. “Did you get his autograph?”

I look at Heck as if he will know the answer, but he's watching the conversation, bemused.

"I don't think I did," I say. It felt sort of crass to ask the man at the time. He had been so earnest. "We just took a lot of pictures together. We talked for a little bit, but I don't really know anything about music."

"So cool." Jeremy looks like he's about to ask me something else, but his mother shoos him away, corralling him back to the stovetop.

"We're just so happy to have you here," Mrs. Tae says, beaming. "And Ensign, of course, we're happy to have you too. Please, both of you, make yourself comfortable however you can. Bathroom is down the hall, and we'll have dinner in about a half an hour—"

"Mom, it's okay, they'll ask if they need it." Heck groans, leans back in his chair, presses his hands over his forehead.

Aw, you're embarrassing him. Tethys flits over the table, changing color from yellow to orange to a bubblegum pink. *Tease him again, Elizabeth.*

Vassa refuses to look up from the table, refuses to look up at Tethys. His nose is twisted up in a bit of a snarl, and I can see the top of his teeth. He appears sullen, just a hulking figure sitting in the corner. A sick feeling bubbles up into my gut looking at him, contrary to all the light I had felt when stepping out of the cloud-hopper.

I remember the way he had looked at me when I was on the ground in front of Kerr. The twist of his nose, the stiffness in his shoulders.

"I'm sorry." I stand up suddenly, despite the protestation of my legs. "I need to get some air. No, it's okay Heck, stay with your mom. I'm just—I'm going out on the porch." I have to lean on the wall as I walk, but I make my way out of the kitchen, out the front door, to the porch

where Captain Lessels is still sitting. She's still reclining with her feet up against the bannister. She has a mug in her hand, and when the door creaks open, she doesn't look surprised to see me.

"Come on," she says. "Have a seat." She drops her feet so I can walk past her.

I fall into the seat next to her, and rest my elbows on my legs, resting my head in my hands. The table with a potted plant next to me wobbles threateningly. I become a small ball of a person, small enough that my heart is almost pressed into my knees.

"Doing all right?" Captain Lessels asks.

I shake my head. I can see the slats of boards through the gap in my legs. "Why wasn't she there? Why wasn't my sister—Why wasn't Annika at the tenth encampment?"

I can almost hear Captain Hanna shrug. "Hmmm. Why did you think she was there to begin with?"

"I don't know. I think—I can't remember the whole last week. Up until Heck shot me, I can't remember anything. I packed a bag, I was taking Annika somewhere safe, but where did I *put* her?" There are tears in my voice, and I flinch. It's embarrassing. I rub at my eyes with the back of my wrist. "I'm sorry. Everything keeps getting so confused."

"You're okay." Captain Lessels' voice is comforting. I can hear her breathing, deep and solid. After a minute, I pick my head up from my hands. Now that I am closer to her, I can see the black ink on her arms is a drawing of a beast with a furry head, and a long, snake-like body. It coils around her arm, poised as though in flight.

I look up, hoping that she hasn't seen me staring at her. The porch overlooks the valley from an idyllic position. The verdant green grass of the hilltop we're on turns into dryer yellow grass a little further away, and then the ground raises up on either side, turning into a mountain covered with trees. The sky is so blue that I could break my teeth against it. The white clouds are

striped against the sky, pulled thin enough that I can see through them to the sky on the other side. It hurts to look at.

A planetary body hangs above us, white and halved, partially obscured by the clouds. I am hit by the uncanniness—we are standing on a sphere, held up only by gravity, fixed in place by the spin of the planet. We are as mutable as the leaves on the trees. There is another planetary body in the sky too, but this one is clearly the sun, so large and bright that my eyes water when they stray towards that side of the sky.

“It’s very big,” Captain Lessels says. I can feel her eyes on me. “I still cry a little bit every time I step off the ship.”

I sniffle. “If you didn’t grow up here, where did you grow up?” I am sitting forward in the chair, so far forward that only the back half of my legs are on the seat. I am a little off balance, but I am straining myself to see the whole dome that covers us. I have only ever seen this sky from the other side.

“I grew up et Ares,” Captain Lessels says, and her voice is sad. “But I haven’t been back for a very long time. It was hard to leave, and it’s even harder to return.”

“My sister interned there for a while.” I wince as soon as the words are out of my mouth. Another thing that is insensitive to recount, another thing that is not normal for anyone else.

“Interned? Like, with Governor Xie?” Captain Lessels laughs a little incredulously. I look over at her, and she is smiling, her brown eyes crinkled up around the edges.

“I guess so. She wasn’t allowed to stay there for too long. We weren’t supposed to know about the riots, but she found out anyway. Mother tried to control all of the information we had access to, but she couldn’t once Annika was off planet.” When Annika was nineteen, the year before she died, mining riots had rocked the economy and the integrity of the atmosphere et

Ares, with bombs causing power outages that threatened to cut off the entire planet's oxygen supply. Annika's internship had been the only time either of us had been allowed out of the biodome et Lunum, and after the riots, we had known it would be the last.

"I always thought it would be so glamorous to be a governor's daughter." Captain Lessels smiles ruefully. "I was twenty when your sister 'debuted'. I remember seeing her photo in the casts and thinking that all of you were so stuck up and spoiled. And of course I was a little jealous, too. She didn't have to see what was really going on, she could just live in an isolated innocence."

I look away so I don't have to make eye contact with her. "We were isolated. That doesn't make us innocent. We could've figured out it was wrong." We hadn't even realized there was a world outside the biodome.

"Probably." Captain Lessels shrugs. "But also, you were under surveillance as much as we were, if not more. At least my mother taught me about self worth. She knew I was meant to be more than an underpaid laborer on a vengeful planet. I don't know if anyone told you that you could be more than a beautiful thing for the broadcasts." She tries for a smile, but it crumples in on itself.

"I don't know. I didn't—I didn't know that I was on the broadcasts. I didn't know how we got the resources we had, I never even thought about any of that. Food and clothes just appeared in front of us, and I never questioned it. I mean, not until Annika died. Then she had access to the Net, without supervision, and we learned everything."

Captain Lessels looks at me seriously. "Dr. Garland told me before you even woke up that you were spliced with exo, but I couldn't figure out why you were trying to hide it from us. I

mean, you are doing so much damage to your mother's reputation, and everything she stands for, just by existing. You have the potential to become the reclamationists' most powerful weapon."

I shake my head. "I don't know. I think I'm afraid." But that's not entirely it. It's shame that floods my body, starting from the top of my skull and flushing my cheeks, working itself into the tips of my fingers and down into my toes. I am ashamed of my faulty memory, of my body, of the wealth of my family and of getting to meet Yu Chen. I am ashamed that my mother killed an exoterrestrial so that I could live. I am ashamed of all of the ignorance I accumulated in my lifetime. It is such a powerful self-hatred that I curl in on myself. I reach up and I touch my head again, feeling the metal on my scalp. "Annika came back wrong. I don't know why. I tried to help her. But it was—" my voice leaves me. My mouth is full of spit and tears.

It had been too late for me to help her. It was too late the moment she died, choking on her own vomit when I wasn't there to save her. Her heart hadn't stopped all at once, her brain hadn't transformed completely, so part of what made Annika truly Annika had time to die before she woke back up again. It had been over the moment she opened her eyes while I was running down the street with her in my arms, a hapless Vassa trailing along behind us.

Captain Lessels put her hand on my shoulder, rubbed my arm. She tugs me over so I am leaning in my chair, my cheek against her shoulder. I don't want to get snot in her hair, but it is nice to be hugged. Tentatively, I rest more of the weight of my head against her. I don't know the last time I have been hugged, so I move gently, as though I might break her.

After a minute, Captain Lessels lets me go. Her expression has hardened, and I can tell that she's thinking. "Thank you, Adrastea, for trusting me."

"You can call me Adra." I play with the cuffs of my sleeves. "That's what Anni called me."

She pats my shoulder again. “And you can call me Hanna.” She takes another sip from her mug, bringing the ceramic up to her face and letting the steam curl up over her face. “You know, I told Heck not to go and get you. I told him to wait a week, that we’d negotiate with Kerr the right way. But he put his foot down, said that wasn’t going to let you rot in whatever Godforsaken hellhole Kerr had thrown you in.”

“Well, he owed me one.” I feel myself smiling. “He did shoot me.”

Captain Hanna laughs. “Does this make you two even?”

I lean back in my chair so she can’t see my emotion on my face, and turn my eyes back to the sky. The clouds have shifted, and now I can fully see the planet hanging in the sky. It is so small, it looks like the sliver of a fingernail. With my newly clear vision, I can see the outlines of domes sketched against the blue sky, reflecting the light of the sun, adding a small bump to the profile of the planet.

It’s my planet. It’s et Lunum. It’s my home, looking down at us, made strange by the distance. All of my life I have been sitting there, looking down and wondering who was looking back. And here I am. Anni would kneel next to me on the bed at night, and she would follow my finger as I pointed to the green and blue below us, telling me that she could see shapes in the clouds, her big hands pressed against the plasti of the window—

—her empty blue eyes staring at me from the hallway floor, her hands covered in my blood, her blonde hair stained red, and our mother stretched out on the floor beside her—

“Holy shit.” I stand up fast enough that the chair rocks behind me.

Captain Hanna sits up straighter, looking at me with concern. “What is it?”

“Holy shit—” I can’t breathe. My eyes fill with tears, and my chest is too tight. “Holy shit, I *left* her there.”