

HUM(IN)FINITY

by

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HUM(IN)FINITY

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For the College

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **HUM(IN)FINITY**

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This work of fantasy fiction deals with themes of intimacy and identity from the perspective of agender, aromantic, and asexual characters as they navigate through a society that is founded on a gender binary, romantic relationships, and sexuality. The main character, Cory, meets a non-human being that comes to be called Ae, and both discover how powerful a non-romantic, non-sexual intimacy can feel. While Cory wants leave earth with Ae to escape the limits of human biology and human society, which cause unbearable stress, others like Zoe and Aki are willing to stay within human society and make changes that will benefit everyone. Following the story is a note from the author that discusses narrative choices and rationales, fantasy genre, and media representation.

## CHAPTER 1

*January 25, 1996, Thursday*

Pulsing bass hums spilled from the speakers and sank into the walls and floor, softening even concrete into vibrations. The air rolled with the more defined beats of the guitars and drums as they swelled through the space, pushing aggressively against exposed brick and distressed wood. Packed bodies in the dance floor bobbed in sync with the broody rhythm, heads nodding and knees bouncing, vibrating as the music swam through conduit flesh, making skin tingle and hairs rise. And from the lead singer flowed a gravelly voice, low and soothing in the hushed parts, and easily climaxing in a coarse scream as the music burst in all its fullness.

The scream was excruciating, scouring both throat and ears, but that was the point. Only a raw and painful sound like that could provide a needed catharsis, brief but satisfying, that all who heard could share in. And as long as the band played, their spell transformed the brick-and-mortar building into a living sanctuary, its members all immersed in the lifeblood melody, the sound that promised a temporary release from the pits where hearts collected all their darkness.

The singer's role in the song came to an end, and the instruments took on their role of guiding everything to a satisfying conclusion. The singer stepped back from the mic and joined the audience in experiencing, with eyes closed, the final currents that carried them from the explosive heights back to the ground, allowing all to land safely while feeling a little lighter. A good ending was just as important as the crescendo, and the singer followed it earnestly with head rocking, sweaty black hair brushing leather-covered shoulders.

Standing in front of the stage's center, among the enchanted audience, Ae expanded to feel all the music. *All* of it. The music gushing from the singer's body. The ebullience in emself as Ae swung and spun and rocked in time. The budding auras, quivering like aureola made of

soundwaves, rising just above the skin of everyone else. It was all there within Ae's reach, loud and clear.

Anyone looking at Ae would see eir black skin, skin so dark it seemed more void than tangible matter, but they couldn't see the aura that sprung from eir body and spread throughout the room, a dynamic, radiant nebula swirling like oil on the splendid water-waves of music. They couldn't see any of the other layers of their reality that made it so vibrant for Ae.

Which was why, as far as Ae was concerned, humans were deaf and blind. But, well, they couldn't help it. This was their world, and by their bodies' design, they could only experience it in a certain way. They didn't know what they were missing, which was good for them, since not knowing how empty their experience was by comparison spared them from an unbearable heartache. Ae might have bothered to learn pity had it been otherwise.

Eir own superficial imitation of those bodies was tolerable because e hadn't designed it to strictly follow the rules natural human bodies did. Which was why as e danced, enraptured by the current song—the *full* song, the song with the depth of a hundred symphonies rising from the singer's heart—e didn't always move with the right restrictions of joint or bone. But it was too subtle to notice among all the other movement in the bar. Anyone who saw eir arm fold or curl in a *not quite right* way would attribute it to a trick of the lights, the alcohol collecting in their system, or perhaps even think it some weird African thing (Ae was often mistaken for an immigrant).

In any case, being noticed wasn't a concern for Ae. E only hid in that costume for the comfort of others, not for eir own safety.

The final notes of the instruments faded on a somber key, to be replaced by staticky white noise from the heavy box speakers and the crowd's applause.

“Thank you,” the singer answered in a monotone while the three other band members waved.

Ae went still on eir feet and ran eir hands back through eir hair, pushing eir head back until e was facing the ceiling. And against eir hair—eir chin-length, glossy white hair—eir black hands seemed even blacker. The music was over, but there was still a delicious tingle in the air to savor as the band packed up their things to continuing applause.

And then the lead guitarist grabbed the mic from behind the singer. “Thanks guys. We’ll see you next week. Bring your friends!” A few final whoops rose up from the quieting applause while the next performer, a lone young woman with an acoustic guitar, waited at the side of the stage to trade places.

Ae drank in the lingering phantoms of emotion in people’s hearts before their seedling auras settled back down, tasting what all had been aroused within those human vibrations—excitement and enjoyment, for sure, but also deep-seated anxiety, aching sadness, and *anger*. Hot, frothing anger. The band’s music had just the right sound to channel those feelings to the surface where their energy could be let loose. Which hurt, more so the deeper within they resided, but there was *relief* too. This music somehow took the ugly things—the things stamped down and locked away—took them and made them sublime. That wonder stayed with the people who felt a song tap into the pressure in their hearts, and Ae caught those starlights in eir aura, extended like a tongue to falling snowflakes.

“Ae.”

Ae slid eir hands down the rest of eir hair and neck before looking sideways to see the singer through eir humanlike eyes.

“Cory,” e greeted back.

“Good vibes tonight?”

Ae grinned.

“Couldn’t you tell?”

Cory shrugged.

“I wasn’t paying attention to *them*.”

Xe never did.

Ae let eir head hang back again and let the sight from eir aura’s perspective take over again. Which meant seeing not just more in terms of *space*, but more in terms of spectrum as well.

“Well, they’re just mild seasoning compared to you anyway,” e sighed. “A nice aftertaste.”

Their vibrations pulsed against eir aura, little rumbles of thunder inside a cloud, together forming a massive prism that let Ae feel the music with the nuance of each individual’s own experience. Each little world here incorporated the song into itself, refracting it, interacting with it, producing new flavors Ae wanted to collect. These were the results of being touched by Cory’s aura, and Ae wanted to experience *everything* that had to do with Cory.

//You make everything feel better,// Ae said without speaking. //Even some of *them* can tell, at least a little.//

Cory didn’t respond to that, not by aura, nor by the human forms of words or expression. Xe just kept xir eyes on Ae and let eir experience of the others shine sunlight on xir own aura. Xe didn’t care so much about experiencing all those auras xemself, but xe enjoyed *Ae’s* experience of them. People were only interesting to Cory when xe saw them through eir eyes.

Ae sighed again. E didn’t need to, of course. It was just for the performance, the intent to *look* as full with relish as e was. Then e straightened eir head to look at Cory, eir perspective retracted and focused back into those false eyes, irises an intricate web of fire-lit gold and amber

filaments despite having no actual nerves or muscles beneath the surface. Ae had simply found the appearance of eyes fascinating enough to replicate their detail in eir own guise.

“Hey, you two,” Zach called, coming up from behind Cory. “Come on, I’m hot and thirsty.”

Cory kept xemself from snapping back, “You can get your fucking drinks without us,” and instead just rolled xir eyes before Zach came around to a place where he could see.

“Yeah, sure,” xe muttered, and Ae gave a half-smile of amusement and sympathy before the three of them joined with the rest of the band—Gabriel, the bass player, and Wyatt, the drummer. They squeezed through the crowd together, many of the fans greeting them enthusiastically and patting each of them on the back and arms as they passed.

To Cory’s intense dislike.

But xe kept xir scowl to a minimum and just nodded back stiffly with as little eye contact as possible.

The hum between performances continued as they settled around their usual table—Cory and Ae seated next to each other with their backs to the wall and the other three each taking their own side of the square—and Zoe was already headed toward them with a tray steadily balanced on her fingertips. She didn’t usually come out from behind the counter—she was a bartender, not a server—but she made an exception for this particular group.

“Nice job tonight,” she said before passing out the usual orders: three beers for the band members over twenty-one, bottled water for Cory, and nothing for the being among them who lacked internal organs. “I think word is spreading about you guys. The crowd gets bigger every week.”

“So maybe soon we’ll start getting more time on the stage, huh?” Zach asked casually as he plucked the cap off his bottle with his own opener, a slightly worn metal shark. He kept it with him at all times, hooked on his belt loop with his keys.

“And better odds of getting scouted,” Gabriel added as Zoe popped the lid from his bottle.

“I’m sure Mike will figure out that it’d be good for business,” Zoe said as she shifted to open Wyatt’s bottle. “Can’t say I know anything about scouting odds though.”

“It’s gonna happen,” Zach said after his first drink, giving Cory a meaningful look. “The universe *made* that voice to be in a *major* band. There’s no way it’s gonna fly under the radar for too long. I mean, did you *hear* him?” He looked around to the others, expression lit. “Those screams gave me *chills*, man! He keeps expanding his range and just going all out like he’s trying to break something. It’s intense!”

Ae noticed the flinch in Cory’s hands and the way xe flexed xir jaw—and the flicker in xir aura.

Ah, so it was one of *those* days—when xir cache of tolerance had depleted to the bottom of the barrel. It wasn’t like that all the time. Sometimes gender was just a mild annoyance xe could let slide off the slopes of xir mind. But then there were times like this, when the instances became more like salt and sandpaper on open sores. Nails scraping on chalkboard. The discordant shriek of a speaker when it wasn’t plugged in right.

But Cory wouldn’t say anything. It was too much labor. Xe had already gone over it with them all in their initial sit-down, and had reminded them at other slip-ups. Xe knew when it happened they weren’t being deliberately antagonistic, and xe already knew the reasons—they just forgot, they were caught up in habit. Hearing them again now, however sincere, wouldn’t ease the irritation. It would only make it worse.

*If you actually fucking gave a shit, you'd remember it better*, xe could hear xemself snap back. Why get into it? Overall, the war was too big for xem to win. It was xem against the whole world. Better to celebrate small victories when they *did* remember than fight as if xe could actually change anything.

Ae felt for Cory. It had to be difficult trying to make people see things differently, trying to make people see *you* differently after they had already affixed an identity to you. Ae had the advantage there: e had never been marked with an identity that needed to be corrected, and no one knew what to think about em when they saw em—except that e was strange. E could slide around in the uncomfortable gray spaces between people's expectations, too slippery for anyone to grasp.

But Cory.

For seventeen years, xe had been so *obviously* male, and it had only gotten worse when puberty had matured xir face to one far older than xe really was. People looked at Cory, saw xir body and face, heard xir voice, and just *knew* that xe was a “he”. Xe couldn't escape it. Especially when xe didn't want to change anything about xemself to cause them to rethink their assumption. Xe was comfortable the way xe was, just not with the way people *thought* about xem. Not just xem, the way they framed their view of *everyone*, creating nothing but “hes” and “shes” without any real thought. Why the fuck didn't anyone *think* about it? Why the fuck didn't anyone realize how fucking *stupid* it was? Why the fuck couldn't xir bandmates, people who had been open to the idea when xe explained it, who had said they “got it”, why couldn't even *they* understand, like, *really* understand, deep in their bones? Xe was tired of experiencing these ties with some of the (very) few people xe actually chose to spend time with.

The irritation made xem grind xir teeth, making xir jaw lines cut against xir sharp cheeks.

“And if we don’t get signed by the time Cory graduates, then we’ll hit the road and do some touring, see if we can get more exposure outside the area here and get lucky somewhere else. Right?”

Zach gave Cory an expectant look. Cory met his gaze indifferently as he took a long drink from his water, the silence holding the satisfying potential that he might say what he was actually thinking. But when he finished, he set the bottle down and nodded.

“Right.”

Zach gave the table a triumphant slap before looking at Zoe.

“He doesn’t look it, but he’s excited.”

Zoe hummed.

“Oh I know just how excited *Cory* is.”

She and Cory shared a look, Cory with a flat expression as he tipped the bottle in circles along its bottom edge. They both knew Zach wasn’t a bad guy, his enthusiasm just blinded him a little. And it wasn’t like he didn’t have reasons to want fame and fortune. Some days, the hope of being saved from rancid poverty was the only thing that kept him from just ending it all. They all knew it. They let him play up the dark humor when he needed it to cope, but the understanding was still there that if it ever felt like there was no other life waiting for him outside the cramped and ratty house he rented together with Gabriel and Wyatt, he would very likely, one night, just drink himself to death.

So Cory let himself be used. As much as it felt like skewers in his spine being called “he”, he wasn’t sure that was enough of an excuse to dash the guy’s hope like a beer bottle against the counter. Which he was itching to do, just bash the glass down so hard he felt the shattering impact send tremors up his whole arm. But instead he, just kept rolling the plastic

bottle along its bottom circumference, trying to find calm in the rhythm, and willing the reminder into Zach's mind, since he didn't know if Zoe's subtle hint had worked.

But Zach was already caught up in his own hopeful fantasies, eyes glazed over as he drank.

Cory breathed hard through his nose, nostrils flaring. It was so frustrating that there was a greater possibility of becoming a rock star than of being recognized as the genderless person he felt himself to be, the option that actually mattered and that wouldn't cost anyone any money.

God, fuckin' *people*.

"All right, well, you know where to find me," Zoe said. She had on a gray short-sleeve shirt layered over with a black denim vest. It was from her days in the punk diy scene, complete with sewn patches and studs lining the shoulders. She liked the style because it showed off her arms, which exuded her raw butch energy in the exposed flexing muscles. Part of it was for herself, but another part was in the hopes of warding off most—it could never be *all*—of the advances from men.

"Yes we do," Gabriel replied.

Zach agreed with a smile and a shake of his bottle.

"Let me know if you need something."

"We will," Wyatt said while passing a few bills to Zoe as thanks. She took them without looking and stuffed them into her pocket, nodding her own thanks, and then headed to the bar, empty tray tucked between her side and her arm.

"You know," Gabriel mused, "I'm pretty sure she could just tell Mike he should book us for longer and he'd do it."

Zach's eyes went deep with thought as he agreed, "Yeah, he would." And then he looked around the table, most likely wondering which of them would be the best person to suggest the

idea to Zoe. His eyes stopped on Ae, and Cory just *knew* what he was thinking, that maybe the fact of them both being black would make Zoe more receptive to hearing it from Ae's mouth. He didn't say it, just considered Ae for a moment, twisting his bottle by the neck between his fingers—until the distraction came.

Out of the otherwise anonymous crowd, Cory looked over Zach's shoulder and saw three familiar faces approaching, which he only noticed after he had detected their intent brush noxiously against his aura. They were three guys, not much older than himself, striding through standing clusters and the other occupied tables. The air suddenly tasted bitter in Cory's mouth. Two of the guys had the same face and the same hair (blond, but also bleached and gelled into spikes), the same height, and the same athletic build, though only one of them was inclined to show his off with a tank top. The other had on a clean button-down and expensive jeans. The third wasn't a carbon copy, with his darker hair and shorter, leaner body, but there was a clear family resemblance in his face. Just the sight of them was enough to make Cory scowl and his whole aura rumble.

"*Heeey,*" one of the twins greeted loudly, throwing his hands up to his sides and casting a very nasty smile. "I didn't know if we'd be able to catch you after your big performance!"

"What are *you* doing here?" Cory's voice dropped under the weight of his contempt, but none of them seemed bothered by it.

"Can't you tell?" the first guy sneered as they all reached the space behind Zach, who turned ninety degrees in his chair to get a look at the newcomers. "We heard you were in the lineup tonight. So we came to check it out. You know, show our *support.*"

Cory eyed him directly, unblinking, body tensed with restraint but ready to strike out in an instant should any excuse arise.

“Gotta admit, you’re better than I would’ve thought,” he continued. “Who knew you weren’t just a creep hiding in your room all this time?”

Petty words. Not enough to pull the trigger in xir muscles. Cory waited.

“And who the fuck are *you*?” Zach asked, looking up at them with his arm set on the back of his chair, judgment furrowing his brow. Cory nudged Zach with xir foot to get his attention. When Zach glanced back across the table, Cory gave him an “I got this” look paired with a vague “leave it” wave. Zach looked confused but complied, along with the rest, in annoyed silence.

“Who the fuck am I?” he repeated with a snicker. “I’m Lance. The *proud*—” He pressed his hand over her heart with feigned emotion. “—cousin of this rising star. *This*,” he said while throwing an arm around his twin’s shoulders, “is Bryce. And *this*.” He nudged the smaller one with his free fist. “Is Hunter. Our little brother.”

“By *a year*,” Hunter complained with an eye roll. “*Less* than a year.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lance countered, pushing Hunter’s head in a joking way that wasn’t entirely amicable. “You always say that, but you still look like you’re twelve.”

“I *do not*,” Hunter snarled, swinging his arm high enough to whack Lance in the back of the head.

“Oh *real* mature,” he snapped back, shoving Hunter easily off his balance. “You really made your point there.”

“Like *you’re* so goddamn mature!”

“You’re *both* fucking *embarrassing*,” Bryce said, looking them over.

“You’re *all* a fucking pain in the *ass*,” Cory muttered, xir voice covered by the speaker-amplified guitar strings and husky contralto singing. It had never occurred to xem that these

idiots would ever show up to a gig. And xe was already in a bad mood. Fan-fucking-tastic. Xe shook xir head while rubbing xir forehead.

“Hey, asshole, don’t get that fucking *attitude* when we came here to tell you good job,” Lance said, sounding genuinely annoyed.

Cory looked up with a flat expression.

“Oh, is *that* what you came here to say? *Really?*”

“I already said you were better than I thought, didn’t I?”

“I don’t give a shit what you think. Now or ever.”

Lance smiled again, putting a twist in his face that by conventional standards was quite attractive—something he was well aware of. Then, as he took some leisurely steps around the table to stand next to Cory, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a carton of cigarettes and a lighter. Leaning one shoulder against the wall, he gave Cory a pointed look and asked, “You still don’t like smoke?”

Cory curled his lip.

“No,” xe answered flatly. “That’s why I like it here. It’s a *no-smoking* bar.”

Lance snorted.

“Right,” he said dismissively, flicking the flame into life after pulling out a cigarette. And then he dragged in deeply, his eyes fixed on Cory’s over the warm glow, then leaned down. Knowing what was coming, Cory reached up with both hands, closing Lance’s nose and covering his lips just as he was about to blow into xir face. With nowhere for the smoke to go, Lance gagged on his own trapped breath until Cory stood up and shoved him back—with a knee to the stomach for good measure.

Lance coughed and stumbled, hunched over, though he was strong enough to take one hit without losing too much balance. Now that Cory was facing him at xir full height, Lance looked

ready to step things up. But in the moment he needed to catch his breath, there came a booming  
“HEY!”

Zoe had a voice that could cut through anything else, a quality that served well in a space usually full of noise. Lots of people looked in her direction, even the girl on stage, though she didn't stop playing. Cory and Lance were the last to look, so she was already halfway to them when they did, stomping in her thick-heeled combat boots. Anyone in the line of her path quickly moved out of it, giving her a clear view of Lance as she hollered, “Yeah, *you!* Can't you *read?*” She pointed, without looking away from him, to one of the many signs posted around the place. “Hell, you don't even have to *read*. It's a goddamn *picture*. No. *Smoking.*”

Zoe arrived, forming a close triangle with Cory and Lance, and it was the first time Cory had seen Zoe use her height to assert dominance, shoulders wide and hands on her hips. Lance, not appreciating being approached like a misbehaving child, wrinkled his nose in defiance.

“Oh please, does anyone actually take something like that seriously?”

Zoe wasn't fazed by his audacity. She kept a solid stance and asked, “Do you see anyone else, literally a *single goddamn person* in here besides you with a cigarette?”

Lance didn't deign to look around, proving that he didn't actually care what anyone else was doing, only about what *he* wanted to do if he could get away with it.

“What kind of bar doesn't allow smoking?”

“The one that you're in. *Right now.*”

“That's fuckin' *dumb.*”

“And you're welcome to keep thinking that while you're in here *not smoking*, or while you go literally *anywhere else* to do all the smoking you want.”

“What if I *don't* go somewhere else?” he asked provocatively, holding the still-lit cigarette up and giving it a little waggle between his fingers.

Zoe's face scrunched, unimpressed.

“Child, I will *haul* your ass right out to the street. Literally. I will *throw* you out the door. You will *not* disrespect this place.”

“You seriously think you can take me?”

Zoe snorted.

“Please. I've taken out men twice your size.”

Cory could see the thought that passed through Lance's mind as he turned around to look at Bryce. If it was possibly true that Zoe had a history of taking down men twice his size—and he was at least considering that it was—then he would stand a better chance having two men of his size in the challenge.

But Bryce crossed his arms and gave him a warning look.

“Don't look at *me*. I didn't come here to fight.”

Lance scowled.

“Fuck you. I know exactly what *you* came for. Worthless bastard.”

Bryce flashed a smile.

Lance rolled his eyes then turned back to Zoe and looked her up and down. Then wrinkling his nose again, he conceded. “Fine. Whatever. I was just joking around anyway.”

“Uh-huh,” Zoe replied while reaching out and taking the cigarette from his fingers before he could *jokingly* drop it on the floor to stomp it out. “Now, since you're still underage,” she said, eyeing the black X on his hand, “I can offer you some non-alcoholic drinks, *should* you want anything. Otherwise, enjoy your time.” She said this with a very strict gaze, one that didn't so much dare him to test her patience, but one that warned him not to.

She passed a look around the whole collection, then turned to get back to the bar. Lance sneered at her from behind, and making sure he wasn't loud enough for her to hear, he spat, "Bitch."

"Why?" Cory asked, still feeling the rumble of xir aggression. "Because she won't put up with shit from *you*?"

Lance made a scoffing sound in lieu of a retort, then getting a superior expression, asked, "Does your *mom* know about any of this? Does she know you're at a bar, this late at night?"

Cory responded with xir own scoff.

"You know she wouldn't give a shit if she did."

"You *sure*?"

Cory rolled xir eyes.

"Yeah. Real sure."

"What about your *dad*?"

"Dude, what are you getting at? I'm not hiding anything. Go tell 'em if you want, I don't care."

Lance exhaled, but before he could attempt another provocation, Bryce came forward. Not toward either of them, but toward Ae.

Because Ae had piqued his interest.

Not just for being particularly noticeable on eir own, but because he had noticed instantly how *close* Cory sat next to em. *Willingly*.

His sights had found their target then.

Bryce filled the vacancy left by Cory, sliding down into xir chair and folding an arm over the head as he faced Ae. Cory instantly lost interest in Lance and stiffened, willing Bryce to burn with xir eyes.

Ae, however, looked at Bryce with a relaxed air.

“Hey,” Bryce greeted, contrasting Lance’s contemptuous use of their face with a charming smile.

Ae returned the smile with a bland one of eir own. E recognized these cousins. E knew the full history of them from Cory’s point of view. The hot-metal throbbing in Cory’s aura, rooted in the sun-flare heat of xir heart, was not surprising, but the intensity of it motivated Ae to strum a few calming notes toward xem. There was no need for it.

And Cory knew it, which was why xe didn’t fight the influence. Xe calmed some, but kept a hard vigilance. The bandmates didn’t interfere because of how undisturbed Ae seemed, but they too kept a close, though awkward observation.

“What’s your name?”

“Ae.”

“Ae? That’s cool. I’ve never heard that name before. Is that like, African?”

Cory snorted. Not just out of scorn, but from involuntary amusement. It was the closest xe had gotten to a real laugh in a while. Bryce ignored xem.

“Not that I’ve heard,” Ae answered politely, allowing Bryce to believe there was any point to continuing this one-sided flirtation—out of curiosity.

“Oh yeah? I thought you were from Africa. My bad.”

“You’re not the only one.”

“Where *are* you from?”

Ae smiled.

“Everywhere and nowhere.”

Bryce smiled too, willing to roll with anything for the sake of his end goal.

“So you’ve moved around a lot?”

“Oh yes, I’m always moving. I prefer to be in motion.”

He laughed like he thought Ae was odd, but in an attractive way.

“Aren’t *you* mysterious.”

“Just the way I like it.”

Bryce then casually leaned toward Ae, laying his whole arm along the head of eir chair, and asked conversationally, “Well how *old* are you? Over eighteen, right?”

All the bandmates had their brows halfway up their foreheads when they glanced collectively toward Cory. At which point, even *they* could sense the fury radiating from xem.

Again, it was Ae’s calming chords that kept xem from jumping onto Bryce with fists pounding—a familiar image that was likely to appear again if not prevented.

Ae merely smiled and answered, “Yes, I’m over eighteen.”

Bryce was nineteen, but Cory doubted he actually cared about making sure someone was of legal age before he went after them. The question was just to rile Cory up.

“Nice. I am too, by the way. So how do you know Cory?”

“I know Cory very well,” e answered, hiding eir mischief under an innocent smile.

Bryce nodded and moved on easily, asking the question he meant.

“How’d you two meet?”

“I followed the music.”

Bryce maintained his charming smile, but he was starting to wonder if English was eir first language, even though e had no perceivable accent.

“So, are you a groupie or something? Not that I’m judging.”

Ae’s smile didn’t falter, and the same innocence imbued eir question, “What’s a groupie?”

Bryce paused, maintaining his own smile as he thought about how to answer, then decided on, “Someone who gets obsessed with rock stars and follows them around.”

“Ah,” Ae replied with a tone of understanding. “No, I don’t think I’m like that. They’re the only bad I follow.”

“That so?” At that point, he openly explored em up and down with his eyes, making the atmosphere at the table even more tense with the bands’ indignation. But Ae showed no offence. “So, are you Cory’s girlfriend?” He asked because he was already certain the answer was yes. Which of course was why he was so interested in seducing Ae away.

It was fucking stupid, but Cory had finally had enough of standing back. Xe strode up in a cloud of rage and stomped xir sole against the edge of the chair.

“Ae *can’t* be my girlfriend because Ae’s not a *girl*. You fucking *moron*.”

Bryce deigned to give Cory an unimpressed look, then turned back to Ae to consider eir face more thoroughly with a smug smile.

“Oh, she’s a girl. I can tell.”

“*Oh*,” Cory said, exaggerating xir voice with a heavy roll of xir eyes. “*You can tell*. Fuck me dude, that’s real X-Men level power you’ve got.”

“You’re adorable,” Bryce said flippantly.

With another stomp Cory said, “And you’re in my seat.”

“*Your seat?*”

“Yeah, *my seat*.”

“You really wanna make this some kind of middle school terf fight?”

“Better than watching you and your nasty shit.”

“Hey *listen*,” Bryce said with a new gravity in his tone. “We’re two consenting adults, and we can get into whatever nasty shit we want.”

“Who said Ae wants anything to do with you?”

Bryce sighed condescendingly. “God, you’re seventeen now and you’re still such a *kid*. Learn to read the room.” He then reeled his arm in from the chair head so he could lower it and put his hand on Ae’s thigh—and then run it up the inside.

Before his hand could reach any destination, Cory had grabbed him by the arm and neck with both hands and dragged him out of the chair onto the floor. Obviously Ae didn’t need anyone protecting em, it was just the principle of the thing. That, and xir temper was already triggered. It would have been harder to hold back than to just let it fly.

“Touch Ae again!” xe shouted as xe straddled Bryce, squeezed his throat, shook it for emphasis. “I dare you—I *fucking dare* you. I will fucking *kill* you! I swear I will *fucking*—”

“HEY!”

Zoe was back, and a small crowd of the closest other patrons had formed to watch her squeeze Cory’s wrists and pry them away from xir coughing cousin. Even the bandmates were all on their feet to get a better look.

“*Not* in here!” Zoe ordered, binding Cory effectively against herself. Cory seethed, teeth bared as xe watched Bryce rub his throat and rise back up to his feet.

“Thanks,” he said, and Cory had flashbacks to all the times xe had been similarly pulled off Bryce, who happily played the role of victim to Cory’s uncontrollable outbursts.

Zoe didn’t follow the script.

“Oh don’t think *you’re* off the hook.” She looked at Cory and asked to the back of xir head, “You good yet?”

Cory exhaled hard, feeling the effect of Ae’s aura-touch again, and nodded.

“Yeah. I’m good.”

“All right.”

Zoe unwound her arms from Cory's shoulders so she could forcefully guide xem with a push to the table, then nailed Bryce in place with a look.

"Don't think for one second that I haven't been *watching* you. I'm not gonna put up with anymore shit from any of you. We've got *rules* here, dammit, and if you're here to start something I'll throw you out just as fast as I'll throw the other one."

Bryce held up his hands as if to surrender.

"Hey, I'm not here to start any fights. I'm not violent."

Cory scowled. Bryce didn't *have* to be violent. Because he was always so *strategic*. Always making sure to provoke Cory when there were authority figures around who would step in. And then *Cory* got all the blame, because *Cory* made things *physical*. It was so convenient for everyone to just ignore everything that had led up to it, so easy to pin Cory with a reputation for being out of control when all the reasons for xir outbursts were deemed irrelevant.

Cory's hands trembled with the desire to feel the impact against Bryce's face. If xe was going to get censured anyway, why not? The dim room got dimmer as xir vision narrowed in on Bryce's punchable face.

Zoe wrinkled her nose.

"Right. You're so *civil*. You're all about harmless *talk*, right?"

Bryce looked like he was about to say something, but Zoe just waved her hand impatiently.

"Nah-ah. I don't wanna hear another word from you. And I promise, if you use any more of that *talk* of yours to provoke Cory or anyone else here, like you goddamn *know* is *exactly* what you're doing, then I'll put you on our ban list. Got it?"

Bryce held a stiff face. Cory could tell he didn't want to look like he had lost control of the situation or that his efforts had been undermined, so he decided to play it all off casually to

save some dignity. He let his face melt back into a charming smile and held up a hand in the gesture of an oath.

“Got it,” he replied pleasantly.

Zoe kept a firm eye on him for a moment. She didn’t believe he had any good intentions, but she could live with that as long as she had the power to make him behave.

“All right,” she said when she was satisfied, and she moved slowly as she turned, giving Cory another inspection, then looked at Hunter with a raised eyebrow. “Are *you* gonna cause me any trouble?”

Hunter scowled at his brothers for earning him a bad reputation by association, then looked Zoe in the eye. “No.”

Zoe gave him an assessing look, then continued on her way back to her station.

Ae experienced everything with great interest, making sure to keep eir puppet in the chair visibly calm while the rest of em was spread throughout the air among the scene, learning the inner feelings of everyone as they vibrated outward. They were easier to feel at a time like this, when tensions were high, when adrenaline made hearts beat faster. Cory’s anger, of course, was the most intense of all the other emotions, and Ae knew xe found letting xir anger out satisfying and cathartic. But e also knew that in a public context like this, there were rules that wouldn’t let xem release that anger without consequences.

That was one of the interesting things about this world. All the structures. All the expectations that hummed invisibly in the air that the humans shared and that guided their actions and set in motion social cause-and-effect. Ae didn’t think e could ever get enough of seeing how that worked, how there were so many changes to the rules and expectations depending on so many variables. It was so *fascinating*.

E just had to make sure Cory didn't get in trouble, and e knew that punching xir cousin in the face until it broke—as e could taste was xir desire to do—would in fact get xem into a lot of trouble.

*But.*

E still wanted to make sure there was *some* satisfying ending to this whole ordeal.

E pulsed a new rhythm toward Cory, this time not to soothe xir aura, but to share a message. Cory felt it and understood it. A wordless sensation that could be translated into something like, //I'll take it from here.// Xe looked at Ae—the small puppet that served as eir avatar, anyway—and saw no sign of the mischievous smile that xe could feel bright as neon in eir aura.

Ae stood up, a change that earned em all the attention of the bandmates and cousins. E set eir eyes on Bryce and glided past Cory toward him while mimicking the charming, flirtatious air he had given em the opportunity to learn.

“Hey,” e greeted again.

Bryce smiled, ready to pick right back up where they had left off.

“What's up?”

The height Ae had chosen for eir physical manifestation was such that e had to set the gaze upward to meet Bryce's eyes. So e did, and playfully asked, “So, you really think I'm a girl?”

Bryce pushed his lips sideways and made a show of looking em up and down and examining eir face again, as if actually deliberating it, before answering confidently, “Yep. You're a girl. I mean, I can see how it'd be hard to tell for some people, but I *know*. Guys and girls just have different *vibes*, you know?”

Ae *didn't* know. E had felt the auras of so many humans by now, and e had not picked up on any essential quality that differentiated so-called “men” and “women”. But e just kept the playful smile, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, letting him believe whatever he wanted to believe—for just a little longer.

“So you wouldn't believe me if I told you I'm *not* a girl?”

E was careful to keep eir tone light. Friendly. Non-threatening.

“Heh, no, sorry. I'd need a *little* more proof than just that.”

“Is that so?”

“Yup.”

“I see. Well, here, how's this? Why don't we go somewhere *private*, and I can show you what I *really* am?” E manipulated the tone of eir voice, making it thick and dripping. “You can tell me if you like what you see, ok?” E reached up and tapped his nose with a flirtatiously knowing expression, and Bryce, being as solidly convinced as he was of Ae's sex, interpreted Ae's proposal as flirting back. Hard. Which, to him, was a great recovery from his lost battle with Zoe.

“Sounds good.”

Cory didn't know what exactly Ae had in mind, but xe knew that Bryce had absolutely no reason to look as pleased as he did. And it was disturbing how easily Ae pulled off performing a seductive manner on the first try. As e turned around, the last look over eir shoulder to Bryce was so strong it gave the same impression as beckoning him with a curling finger.

Once e had turned enough to break eye contact, Bryce cast a triumphant glance to Cory while taking his first step to follow.

Cory gave no reaction.

Not until Lance slid up next to xem and laughed. “Look at that, he got what he came for. And with your *not-girlfriend*. What do you think? Are they gonna fuck in the guys’ bathroom or the girls’?”

Part of Cory flared in anger, of course, but the larger part was so tickled by the sheer stupidity of all those words put together that another involuntary laugh came bursting up xir throat.

“You can’t *actually* think that’s what’s gonna happen.”

“Why not? Looks like that’s *exactly* what’s gonna happen. I mean come on, no one pulls Bryce somewhere *private* without looking to fuck.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Ok. Now you’re just trying to play it cool because he stole your girl.”

“Ok, first of all, no one can *steal* Ae. Second of all, Ae’s still not a girl.”

Lance snorted.

“Yeah she is. I’m with Bryce. It took me a while, but I can tell.”

“Funny, no one else can ever make up their mind. But you two really think you’re so goddamn special, don’t you?”

“Fuck yeah we do,” he laughed proudly.

Cory felt an almost physical pain hearing that obnoxious laugh. How the fuck did so many people think he was hot? It was some bizarre human code xe could never crack, and if the code led to finding these dipshits attractive, it wasn’t one xe wanted to understand.

Ae led Bryce down a hall in the back of the bar and then through the door to the women’s bathroom, which was empty and fairly clean with four open stalls.

“Lock the door,” Ae said, and though eir voice was soft, it carried through the muffled music seeping in through the walls.

Bryce was quick to comply, turning the switch with an audible *click* as metal bumped against metal. “You know, I wasn’t sure if you’d done this kind of thing before,” he said, grinning in a way that wasn’t so charming anymore. “But now I’m thinking—”

“Hang on,” Ae said with eir arm stretched out when he started to come forward. “You’ll get a better view from there.”

“View,” he repeated, snickering like it was a joke.

“That’s right. I said I had something to *show* you, didn’t I?”

He laughed.

“Yeah, you did. But come on, it’s not *really* a surprise what you’ve got in there,” he said, eyeing eir pelvis as if eir hipbones cupped an offering meant just for him. “I told you, I *know* already.”

“You did say that,” e agreed. “But I’m pretty confident you’ve never seen anything like this.”

As Ae unbuttoned and unzipped the front of eir black denim pants, Bryce laughed again.

“What, you think I’ve never seen black pussy before?”

“I wasn’t thinking about that at all.”

Just as Bryce’s expression had shifted to show the dirtier undergrowth in his mind, Ae’s own face had taken on the mischievous quality of the aura he was completely oblivious to. E slipped eir thumbs into the waist of the jeans and began sliding them down all the way to eir boots, revealing more of eir black skin and the shape of eir lean dancer’s legs. Ae stood up straight, bared beneath eir hips, feeling the anticipation of a predator luring in prey. The trap was set, the pretenses laid to encourage complacency.

And e could see it working. At fist Bryce showed satisfaction at seeing, just as he had known, that Ae was definitely *not* a guy. And while smugness dimmed his perception, Ae's clothes shifted in accordance with eir will, completely unnoticed. The jeans and boots were just *off*, bunched up together on the floor, allowing Ae to freely lift a knee. E reached down to tuck eir heel into eir palm, and slowly, easily, e lifted the leg up into the air until e had created a 180-degree angle with both.

And Bryce's self-satisfied expression warped into one of wrinkled confusion.

Because he was staring right at the spot in the center of Ae's thighs, right where the vulva should have been spread open. But instead there was nothing.

Just skin.

Smooth, black skin.

Like the inner part of an elbow.

He rationalized Ae had to be wearing a leotard. That's right, like dancers did. They wore skin-tight layers to give exactly that effect so that they could spread their legs this wide without turning their performance obscene. Of course. He had almost been fooled. It had just looked so real because Ae's skin was so utterly *black*. But of course it was a black leotard he was looking at.

"Go on, touch it," Ae murmured, eir seductive tone turning dark. E ran eir free hand lightly along the surface of eir own legs, eir fingertips stroking up and down eir inner thighs, passing over the smooth section of *nothing*.

Encouraging his fingers to do the same.

He didn't know what kind of game this was. Surely this girl couldn't expect him to really believe her charade would last once he touched and felt the bumps of her vulva hidden beneath the spandex. So what was she really aiming for, getting him to come close and touch?

Well, whatever she had in mind, if she was going to invite him in like that, he wasn't going to decline. What was there to be afraid of anyway? Despite all the times he had taken hits from Cory, he actually was strong enough to fight if he wanted to. Like Lance, he had the muscle definition expected of a high-school athlete who was keeping up his fitness in college, primarily by being on the school's track team.

So he crossed the distance between them and reached out, slid his fingers up a few inches of eir lower thigh, until he reached the center point.

And it was *skin*.

This texture, it wasn't spandex, or polyester, or nylon, or leather, or suede. It was *skin*. The skin he would expect to feel if he touched any other part of eir body.

It couldn't be.

He began pushing, trying to force his fingers into any of the openings he knew *had* to be there. Trying to find any hint of dampness in the fabric. Any bumps and valleys and niches that should define the shape of eir labia. But it was like thrusting into the back of a thigh: nothing but a smooth surface and dense muscles underneath.

Unable to comprehend, he began to desperately search for the edges of the leotard. He ran his hands up over Ae's hips, under eir shirt to eir waist and ribs, but found nothing.

(Not even a belly button, his unconscious noted and disregarded.)

So he tried lower.

He bent down and ran his hands in a tight ring down Ae's thigh, over eir locked knee, down eir solid calf, and at the ankle found nothing. And it was clear that eir foot was bare. (And again, he unconsciously noted and disregarded the realization that he had not seen Ae take off eir boots.) He tried plucking at the skin to see if the leotard was just so tight and smooth he couldn't

feel it, but with no body fat to form a cushion between Ae's skin and muscles, he couldn't even bunch up enough skin to get a pinch of it.

He looked up from where he crouched to the spot, the smooth spot that made Ae appear to have the anatomy of a Barbie doll.

Which just wasn't physically *possible*.

"*What the fuck?*" he muttered to himself.

Ae smiled.

And all the friendliness was gone—but not the play.

"Right, you did want to *fuck* me, didn't you?" e asked. And with a tone that sounded like the equivalent of licking eir lips, e said, "Here, give this a try."

And right in front of Bryce's eyes, Ae's black skin cracked, a slit opening right there in the center of eir thighs. That alone was a shock, but what really made him jump back onto his ass was the hissing sound that spewed from it, and the tiny sharp teeth that became visible the wider the slit opened, lining the gums of the hungry mouth—and forming several more rings further inside the mucous throat.

"Jesus *Christ!*"

Ae's smile seemed to drip venom.

"Funny. You didn't strike me as the religious type."

Staring into the gaping, razor-lined hole, Bryce could see the pale pink bands of muscle undulated hungrily, causing all the sets of teeth to ripple in a motion that seemed designed to pull prey in deeper. And like traffic spikes, they would shred anything that resisted in the wrong direction. Bryce froze, caught by an internal war between the panicked urge to run and the inability to look away.

"Fuck, did you *drug me?*"

His eyes were wide and he began beating his own skull with both hands, trying to force the hallucinogens to back off from his brain. As he did, Ae lowered eir foot back to the ground in a fluid motion that didn't quite follow the usual range of human joints.

“Would it make you feel better if I said yes?” e asked as e came closer and crouched down in front of him. He could still hear the wet slurping and clicking from the monstrous mouth, so he tried to keep his gaze above her collar—and considered sliding back a little so that those teeth couldn't get close enough to catch him.

But they weren't real. They couldn't be. He didn't have to back away from a drug-induced illusion. But *fuck*. The *squelching*—it was so *loud*. He felt it cause his body to cringe, and his stomach began to churn and sting with the taste of acid.

“You did. You definitely did!”

He covered his ears, but in the process he had glanced down, and there it was. That *mouth*. Rounded open between eir bent legs, the teeth rotating like on spinning wheels as the wet inner layers undulated and smacked. Ae was balanced to stillness, perched on eir toes, staring at him hungrily, so no matter whether he looked up or down, the view made his spine prickle.

And then Ae pulled off eir leather jacket, letting it fall to floor off eir back-stretched arms.

“Whoa, what are you doing?”

He couldn't suppress the nervousness from coming out in his voice.

Ae grinned.

“I still have more to show you.”

E grabbed the bottom hem of eir shirt and, with back straightened, pulled it up to eir collar. Bryce found himself confronted with a canvas of the same smooth, black skin as eir face and legs, and it took him a second to realize that nowhere on that canvas were there any breasts.

Not even the smallest mound or tiniest point. Not just that, but there were no areolae or nipples either. In fact, there weren't any clearly defined pectoral muscles at all.

Bryce stared at that black, hoping that if he stared long enough, like a Magic Eye picture, the details would start to make sense, his eyes would be able to see the truth within the incomprehensible.

And then his eyes flicked down and confirmed what he had vaguely been aware of earlier: there was no belly button on Ae's stomach.

His eyes flicked up again.

Nope. Still no nipples.

He began to think, maybe he couldn't see them because they were just as dark as the rest of Ae's body. Maybe they were just blending in too much. Sure, that was it. *Surely*.

"Go on," Ae said again, the invitation sounding even more sinister this time. "Touch."

Bryce shook his head, instantly remembering what had appeared in the last spot he had been encouraged to touch. The image of his fingers being severed off inside a hole that looked like a demonic garbage disposal flashed into his mind and made his whole arm tingle.

"Come on," Ae insisted, eyes round, grin wide. When Bryce still refused, e snatched his hand and forcibly pressed his palm flat against what should have been eir left breast.

"Stop!" he cried in a panic, but Ae's grip was too strong. E kept his hand locked in place, one hand on his wrist and the other near his elbow, and e held him so easily he may as well have been struggling to free himself from cement. And then e slid his palm slowly across eir chest, and it didn't feel right.

At all.

The muscles didn't have the right shape, not for a guy like himself, and certainly not for a woman. It all felt like one smooth band of muscle wrapping around Ae's ribs.

And just as his eyes had detected, there were no bumps along the way where the nipples should have been, not even any scars to hint that they had been removed at some point.

“What the fuck. What the fuck,” he murmured to himself. He couldn’t bring himself to consciously consider that he was locked in the same room as an alien or demon or some kind of shape-shifting witch. But on another *deeper* level, he was definitely feeling the *fear* of it.

“What the fuck *are* you?”

And that was when Ae’s grin went *too* wide, like hooks were pulling the corners of eir lips farther apart. And he thought that eir teeth were sharper now than they had been before—and that there were too many of them.

“What?” e asked with sarcastic confusion. “Are you not *sure* that I’m a girl anymore?”

“Get the fuck away from me!”

But Ae wouldn’t. And e wouldn’t let *him* get away when he tried.

“Am I *that* disappointing to you?”

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

He tugged over and over to try to free his arm from eir grip, but he couldn’t get Ae to tip forward on eir toes even just a little.

And then e began sliding the hand e had at his elbow up his arm, catching his attention. He went still as he tried to figure out what eir next move was going to be, his eyes fastened to that hand as it slid toward his shoulder. It was just a hand, as far as he could tell. Human in shape and measurements.

But the *uncertainty*.

The uncertainty of whether it would *stay* that way.

“Oh god.”

And the sinking realization that he was *caught*.

“Oh god.”

And the chemistry of ice and acid and electric panic all mixing in his gut.

The world was spinning around that black hand centered in his sight.

“What are you so afraid of?”

Ae’s voice had lost its human quality. It was a disembodied hiss creeping through his bones, one he heard not through his ears but inside his skull.

He looked up.

And e *had no face*.

All eir features were gone. The excited round eyes and the elongated shark smile. Gone. Like eir chest, eir face had become just a smooth black plane, like a clothing store mannequin wearing a wig of unnaturally white hair.

And yet somehow, it still seemed to be staring at him with an intense interest.

Bryce felt a kind of break in his mind, and his mouth opened to release the scream ready in his chest. But Ae’s hand was quicker. Like water, it spilled upward from his shoulder all the way to his mouth, covering it fully so that the scream came out through his nose instead. Ae allowed him a moment, and then split eir arm into two, one to leave a puddle of black clay suctioned against his face and another to regain a more humanlike shape, including a humanlike hand. Bryce’s wide eyes conveyed the words he couldn’t speak.

*What the fuck!?!*

Ae held the familiar hand up between them, then willed a talon to grow from the forefinger’s nail, long and sharp. Bryce tried to pull back again, but Ae’s first hand still had his wrist, and the mouth trap didn’t give his head much slack.

But instead of following through on the implied threat, Ae brought the talon to eir own faceless face and punctured the tip into eir cheek.

No blood emerged.

The tip simply sank into the black canvas with hardly any resistance. And it kept going in, deeper and deeper, until the whole talon had been consumed into the soft black clay. And then Ae began dragging the talon sideways, across the empty space where eir nose should have been, to the other cheek, leaving no trail behind.

Bryce was shaking his head, sweat dripping down his face into the black mass that felt something like rippling molasses bundled inside a sack of skin.

Ae pulled out the talon from eir non-face, and with no visible cause, a slit opened along the bottom half, revealing again the shark teeth behind the window of a vicious grin. And then two more slits spontaneously appeared and opened until the whites of Ae's eyes were perfectly round.

*"You'd bleed, wouldn't you? If I cut into you . . ."*

Ae pointed eir talon toward his face. As it drew slowly closer, Bryce could tell it was aimed toward his left eye.

He began thrashing—or trying to. He couldn't move far, or much. Not with more of Ae's clay appendages anchoring him in place. When had they gotten there? He couldn't remember. They were just *there*, clamping down on his legs and other arm. The one over his mouth was now a whole band wrapped around his neck and jaw. He hadn't seen any of it! Or felt it! When? When did it happen?

His heart was going to break open his ribs if it didn't simply collapse from overexertion first. All his sports and cross-country running hadn't prepared him for this.

The tip of Ae's talon settled lightly against the skin just under his eye—with just enough pressure to send a threat, but not enough to break the skin.

Ae leaned in until all Bryce could see were eir eyes, gold and fluorescent.

“I’m very tempted, you know,” e murmured, the voice coming from eir mouth and the hiss appearing in his skull overlapping. “*Very* tempted . . . I’ve never seen a human eye outside the socket. I’m *so curious*.”

Bryce’s nostrils went wide with every exhale, and the veins on his forehead bulged when he strained his voice as hard as he could through his nose.

“However.”

Ae traced a short line along the thin, fragile skin.

“I’m having a good time here, and the fun of peeling you apart right now really wouldn’t be worth the trouble that would come from it. So I’m willing to settle for just this absolutely *wonderful* expression you’ve got, if you’ll answer one question.”

Her irises looked like cauldrons of liquid gold now, swirling and popping with alchemic energy.

“Are you ready?”

Bryce’s nod was more of a shiver, but it sufficed.

Ae dragged the tip of eir sharp grey tongue against the tips of eir pointed teeth. “You said you wouldn’t believe me if I told you I wasn’t a girl without a little more proof.” Eir tone turned viciously condescending. “Is *this* enough proof for you, *Bryce*?”

Bryce answered immediately with more rapid nodding. His nostrils were flaring with the effort to get enough breath to feed his racing blood and his whole face was shining with sweat.

“Oh *good*. That’s really *so* good to hear.” Ae’s human face began to reform right in front of Bryce’s wide eyes, but the predator was still there in the shape of eir smile. “I am glad we could clear that up. But, there’s something else I want you to know too.” With eir body still misshapen into various bindings, e was sure e could keep Bryce’s full attention. His unblinking eyes confirmed it. “So listen,” e continued. “You have absolutely no value to me. None

whatsoever. I just want you to keep that in mind when you're around Cory. Because if *Cory* wants to break your neck, I'm inclined to let that happen. Or if *Cory* wants me to eat you from both ends at the same time, there is nothing about you that would make me hesitate to do it."

Ae added just a little more pressure to the talon, and the tip broke just enough skin that a small drop of blood bubbled up to the surface.

"You truly are garbage," e murmured gently, almost soothingly. "I almost hope you do push me over the edge one day."

E had so much more e could say—or really, an entire new education that e could swarm his aura with—but e didn't feel like giving him redemption. Tonight was about satisfaction, dark and delicious. His aura, which was not a texture Ae was fond of, had become saturated with frenzied vibrations that had an appetizing flavor.

E looked forward to sharing it with Cory.

And with that, eir body began to move with a liquid flow, extra appendages withdrawing from around their catch, retracting back into the correct number of arms and legs. And with some measure of relief for Bryce, eir clothes reappeared in place as well, rising out of eir body as if they had floated up to the surface of water—and hiding that awful sucking mouth. (He noticed, vaguely, that he couldn't hear its sappy pulsing anymore. He hoped that meant it was gone, undone, just as everything else had been.)

"I'm going to step out first," Ae announced. "I assume you're ok with that. Since you take so much pride in your looks, I imagine you'll probably want to take some time to clean up and collect yourself. Take as much time as you need, ok? And hopefully Cory and I will be gone by the time you're ready to show your face again." E gave Bryce a quick brush of eir fingers against his damp, pink cheek, a perversion of affection, then said with a cruel smile, "Until next time."

Bryce flinched, too overwhelmed to move and still unable to take his eyes off em. He watched, muscles taut, as Ae stood up, unlatched the lock, and glided out the door without looking back. When the door fell closed, he jumped up to his feet and lunged to lock it right back up again, pushing his whole body against the door and finally feeling the space to heave for breath.

“What the *fuck?* *What the fuck?*”

The words came out in quick succession, a stream of a shaking voice that couldn't stop even as he slid down to his knees and dug his nails into his scalp.

“What the *fuck?* *What the fuck?* *What the fuck?* *What the fuck?*”

Cory had been surprised when xe felt Ae cut the connection between them. Xe had been expecting to get an insider's view of what was happening through their shared auras, but instead xe only felt radio silence. Xe was stranded, and not at all in the mood to take in the scene raw.

Xe walked away from Lance and sat back in xir chair. Lance hovered nearby, waiting with anticipation to hear about his twin's conquest and to celebrate it in front of Cory. Zach asked Cory some questions, but xe made no effort to answer. Xe could barely even process the words anyway. Xe just didn't care. Xe *couldn't* care. Everything was all knotted together in a haze of nails scrapping against xir skull without the cushioning effect of Ae's presence. And the other musicians on stage didn't help, not with their mediocre sound that barely registered on xir radar. So Zach shifted to talking about other things with Gabriel and Wyatt while they all kept a close side-eye on Lance.

Hunter, meanwhile, stood off by himself, arms crossed petulantly, and muttered to himself, “I don't even know why the fuck I'm here.”

And then Cory felt the reconnection.

Ae's signal reappeared, giving xem back the familiar, constant hum of eir aura that xe needed to feel a sense of *rightness*—in the world an in xemself. But that wasn't all. That was just the fundamental essence. Xe could also sense the sweet vibrations of Ae's gleeful satisfaction. Xe looked up in the direction the two had left in and stood up before xe even saw em. Everyone noticed the movement and quickly looked over as well. Ae didn't appear in sight right away, but eventually emerged from the crowd, alone.

"Where's Bryce?" Lance asked, speaking first.

Ae just gave him a smile and shrugged before passing by toward the table.

"All right, well, you guys did *great* tonight," e said, acknowledging each of the bandmates in turn. "*Really* great." Zach raised his bottle in thanks while Gabriel and Wyatt nodded. Then with eyes turned to Cory, e said, "I think we're going to head out now." Ae could sense the flittering curiosity they all felt about the encounter e had just had, but by now they were familiar enough with eir mystery to leave it alone.

"Sure," Zach said, holding up two fingers from his bottle in lieu of a wave to Cory. "See you tomorrow."

Cory nodded and stepped around the table to Ae's side, and they waved to the bar counter where Zoe was still watching. She waved back, and Ae could taste the curiosity in her aura too.

"Ok seriously, where is he?" Lance asked, coming up behind them.

They both turned around and Ae's lips curled under shining eyes.

"Maybe I ate him."

That made Lance laugh with a mocking jab into Cory with his elbow. "Well shit, if you'll do that kind of thing for him I want to get some of it too."

Ae's face was a blank expression for a few seconds while e dipped just deep enough into Lance to find out what it was he thought e had meant. And then eir mouth opened to let out a

long, “Ohhhhh, I see. You thought . . . No.” E gave him an apologetic smile. “You’ll have to get that from someone else. I’m more interested in eating souls and sanity.”

Lance’s face scrunched with confusion. Ae liked how he tasted when he looked at em, not with lust, but with a sudden revulsion that killed any interest he might have had. And when e let eir tongue out to suggestively lick down eir top lip and front teeth with just the tip, while looking straight at him, eyes smoldering, e could feel the disturbed wriggling in his stomach. Ae gave him the creeps, and e deeply enjoyed it.

And Cory enjoyed it because it made Lance shut the fuck up for a moment, and xe took that opportunity to put xir arm around Ae’s back and get them both moving.

Annoyed, confused, and curious, Lance stayed where he was and watched them continue their exit, weaving among standing, walking, and dancing patrons to get to the door. He looked to the table where the remaining three were eyeing him unpleasantly. He looked to Hunter, who was looking bored and irritable. A pretty typical expression, honestly. He looked around, the walls seeming to breathe as the shifting shadows cast by the bar’s dim lights roughened the exposed brick and distressed wood, exaggerating their textures. And he looked to the stage where the grunge-esque trio that had recently set up were performing a bass-heavy, slow-rolling melody that oozed a haunted aesthetic in every strum.

The whole place felt like a distorted fun house, and he felt disturbingly out of place. The back of his brain itched. He grimaced. “Where the *fuck* is he?”

It took a few more minutes, but when Bryce did finally come dragging into view, Lance’s confusion at the hollow look in his face only spurred his agitation.

“Dude, what happened? You look like shit.”

Bryce said nothing, but his wide eyes spoke of horror.

“Oh fuck,” Lance said, lowering his voice. “Was it a guy?”

Bryce shook his head slowly, his gaze aimed down.

“So . . . she *is* a girl?”

“Shut up,” Bryce snapped. “Just shut up. We’re not talking about it.”

Lance furrowed his brow.

“Why the fuck not? It’s a simple question, isn’t it?”

“I said *shut up!*”

“Dude! What are you so freaked out about? What happened?”

“I’m not talking about it. It’s an *it*, ok? It’s just a fucking *it!* And nothing happened, so just fucking shut up about it!” He then whipped his head around to the band’s table, where the three were watching him curiously. “Do you know?” he demanded loudly.

“Know what?” Zach asked, amused by this unexpected change in Bryce’s attitude. Now he *really* wanted to know what Ae had done to knock this little shit down a peg.

“About that *thing!*”

Zach raised an eyebrow. “‘Thing’?”

Bryce was heaving, his shoulders not looking as strong or confident now, all the charm drained from his pale face. Bryce couldn’t tell if Zach was hiding something or if he genuinely didn’t know, but his head was spinning too much to care. “I’m getting the fuck out of here,” he said, sounding like he might vomit, and turning away from them all he began to stumble toward the door, unapologetically knocking into people along the way.

Lance and Hunter exchanged a look, in agreement for once at seeing their brother unravel right in front of them. Lance looked at the band, wondering if they did know something, but then hurried after Bryce without a word. Hunter followed last, genuinely unnerved. And inside, all three were thinking the same thing.

*What the fuck?*

## CHAPTER 2

The parking lot was full, but once Cory had pulled out onto the street in his black 1989 Saab, the midnight traffic made the suburb feel almost empty. He had school in the morning, but he wasn't worried. After a few weeks into the second semester of junior year, his teachers were already used to him sleeping in class. They had all known to expect it before they had even met him. Word got around like that. And that was fine. What the fuck did it matter anyway?

It didn't.

School didn't matter, not for Cory. It never had, not even before . . .

Ae was in the front passenger seat, letting the wind blow his hair in a whimsical moonlight mess. The top of the convertible was down, letting the night sky fill the view. The black wasn't pure and the stars weren't bright or numerous—not as much as they should have been—but it still felt better, calming, to welcome in the open air and the quiet possibility it offered. If no one else was around, anything could happen. *Anything*. Other people brought limits, obstacles, annoyances. Cory could never fully relax as long as there were other presences vibrating against his own.

Excepting Ae.

So out here in the night, he felt like his whole being could breathe easier. He wanted the drive to last longer, but the bar was less than twenty minutes from his house—at least at this time of night—so it felt like no time at all before he was rolling up the front entrance, past the opened iron gates, and then all the way around to the back. The garage was reserved for his parents' cars, so Cory parked under the extension that protected the path from the back door to the garage, leaving the overly-wide stone driveway completely clear.

Cory's parents were surely asleep, but just to be safe, Ae dissolved his false body to nothing. Cory wasn't interested in getting caught up in any unnecessary conversations if either

xir mom or dad happened to be somewhere in the path from the back door to xir room. Cory wandering in alone at this time wasn't anything unusual, but a second person with xem would be, and Cory wasn't up for any more talking.

So xe slipped inside, unlocking and relocking the door quietly, then moved lightly through the kitchen, the living room, up the stairs, through the open family room—a laughable name, they never used it as a family—and down the left-side hall to xir bedroom. It was almost as far from xir parents' room as it could be, on the second floor and the opposite side of the house, so xe didn't have to work too hard to be unheard. But it wasn't just them xe didn't want to disturb. The quiet itself in the dark house felt calming. Xe wanted to blend in, be a shadow sliding along the carpet and walls.

Xe opened xir door and Ae was there, eir costume of a human form reassembled. With it, e was lying down, eir back on Cory's bed, feet flat on the floor, and white hair spread out like a fan around eir head. E could take any form e wanted. Literally any form e could imagine. It seemed a waste to look so human, especially when it was just the two of them, but Cory didn't dwell on it. What did it matter?

Xe closed the door gently and sat down on the edge of the bed next to Ae. Xe began pulling off xir shoes, which Ae didn't have to do, having simply reassembled emself without them. Ae sat up before xe was done, and while Cory had to pull the covers back to get beneath them, Ae slid like fluid across the top and melted through the fabric. By the time the blankets rose into a mound with eir resolidifying body, Cory was settling down into a comfortable position.

After a long exhale, xe felt the cloudlike brush of Ae's fuller presence caress the strings of xir soul. With Ae spilling into the empty spaces, Cory could feel how expansive xe really was, how deeply xe craved an escape from such a deceptively small and cramped shell. Closing xir

human eyes, a whole world came into focus, unfurling and deepening as Ae pushed through, strumming such a sublime chorus along the way that their blending souls reverberated with an aching, euphoric urge to weep.

Their night had truly begun, and deep in their private universe, a year would pass before they needed to return.

\*

The Infinite. If it were to have a name, that might fit.

But names don't exist there.

There is no language, after all. No *when*. No *where*. Hardly any *why*, because if there is a *why* or a *how* behind anything that happens, no one bothers to think or ask about it. Everything just *is*.

The Infinite wouldn't make much sense to the human mind, shaped as it is by the experience of time, space, and matter. How do you explain hot and cold to someone who has never felt either? How do you explain flavor to someone who can't taste, or colors to someone who can't see? Some things can't be understood through just words.

The Infinite is the same way. Trying to explain it within the limits of language can only provide an approximation—and a pitifully lacking one at that. But there aren't many other options for someone who can't go themselves. So.

As far as anyone knows, the Infinite has no ends, and at the same time, no distance. The closest parallels might be videos and dreams. In these, humans see things and actions taking place in a space. It looks full. And yet, the images don't actually exist anywhere. Movies and games are on a screen, recorded on flat film or as data, and dreams are just images that appear inside a person's mind as their neurons flicker. They aren't *really* taking up the space they appear to, and yet they exist and allow for an experience. The distances you think you see don't

exist because the space is an illusion, as is the sense of travelling through it. Characters move, the place they are in changes, but they are still in the same *space*—the screen or the mind.

In the Infinite, there is no need to *travel*, because there isn't discrete space the way there is in a physical universe. The Infinite isn't an absolute volume. All the comprising spaces overlap, condense, expand, contort. Wherever one wishes to be, the Infinite warps, responding to that desire, until it has brought you and the space together. There is no distance that can be measured in this process, nor is there a need for such a measurement.

The same is true of time. In the Infinite, the concept does not exist. The beings who live in the Infinite do not need it. Their existence is nothing to be measured, for they are not born, do not grow old, and do not die. They do not need any substance to survive—no food, water, or air, not even sleep, since they themselves have no substance to maintain. They do not have societies and cultures since they do not need to rely on the help of anyone else to survive. They do not worry about the future or consider the past. They live freely and unconnected, only engaging with others during chance encounters or by mutual interest to be together. They only do what suits their nature.

That is all they are—their nature. Each being is a substance made of unique vibrations that contain and emit their thoughts, feelings, and fundamental essence. It is these unique vibrations by which they identify each other. Where humans rely on names or appearances—faces, body shapes, fashion styles, mannerisms—or the sound of a voice, the Infinitians (if they are to have a name) recognize each other closer to the way humans can recognize that a song is by a certain band or a painting is by a certain artist. There is a kind of signature flavor to it.

And in a place with no language—no mouths to speak it, no ears to hear it, no eyes to read it—messages are always conveyed perfectly, directly, essence to essence. Meanings are not clouded by individual nuances to shared vocabulary. They don't have to struggle to remember

the right term or talk around the vacancy in a language when the exact word for the desired meaning doesn't exist. Thoughts and feelings are shared in their essence, exactly as the original Infinitian conceives it, inarticulate and whole.

Even so, Infinitians do not communicate frequently.

(“Frequently”—an Infinitian wouldn't understand such a time-oriented term, but for a human it should made sense.)

They don't encounter each other much at all. Mostly, Infinitians are on their own, in a constant state of easy pleasure, because they are simply being themselves, immersed in their own essence with no resistance and no conflict. There isn't much to *do*, really. There's no *need* to do anything. Instead, Infinitians exist inside themselves. In the same way humans can lie down for hours just relaxing, or listening to music, or just immersed in their own thoughts and feelings, Infinitians, for the most part, exist immersed in themselves. Because when your favorite song is yourself and there are no obligations to pull you away from the one thing you want to do—listen to your favorite song on repeat forever and ever and ever—that is what you will mostly do. So they just exist, enjoying just existing without needing to justify that existence to anyone.

Ae—back before e was “Ae”—had never had language. If e had ever bothered to try to think of a way to describe eir life and existence and the Infinite, e would had never needed metaphors or imperfect comparisons to convey it. E would have simply conveyed it. All of it, whole, from eir own essence to another, and it would have been understood exactly the way Ae understood it.

Which was exactly what had happened when e met Cory.

(Such an efficient method. Convenient. Overwhelming, perhaps, for Cory, but it turned out fine.)

And in return, when Ae received the English language, whole, from Cory, with the complete understanding that Cory had of it, eir mind was fascinated and quickly engaged in the exercise of trying to use such a tool to articulate something it wasn't designed to articulate. It was frustrating to speak with so much incompleteness, and yet, there was something about being *frustrated* for the first time in eir life that was exhilarating.

But before that, there had been the first time in Ae's existence that e had felt *curiosity*. It was when e had found the universe, a small pocket of *something* existing in wide-open nothingness. Ae had been existing, as usual, with not much to notice beyond emself, and then e drew/was drawn into a new warped fold of empty space—to find that it wasn't completely empty. Occasionally—

(“Occasionally”—a measure of occurrence, which Ae didn't track, and which wouldn't make sense with no map of time to plot it in anyway.)

—when Ae moved or shifted from one location to another, an Infinitian was already there or near enough that Ae could feel the edges of their presence. But this was something else, something e had never encountered before. Which was certainly within the range of possibility, given how *infinite* the Infinite was. Ae got closer to inspect. At first it seemed tiny, so Ae warped until it seemed bigger. Ae studied it, perusing its exterior, but that didn't provide enough information for em to understand it.

So Ae decided to enter. In the Infinite, every speck of *place* opened up into another expanding infinity. All you had to do was warp yourself in relation to it, and you would find yourself inside. Ae did so here, warping until the unusual something became a space inviting em in, decompressing so that its vastness was easier to see.

And everything was so *different*.

Space felt different. Mostly because Ae could actually feel it *at all*. There was constant energy in every little place, with layers of different energies meshed together and filling the entirety, as far as Ae could tell, without breaks. Outside, the Infinite was massive spaces of *nothing*, empty spaces that opened up infinitely the deeper you dived into a piece of that nothing. Inside each point of nothing was another vast sea of nothing. But here, in this universe, there was always something, always more energy vibrating in its soupy space. Ae moved through it, a vibration emself, encountering so many different kinds of waves and so many different frequencies of those waves—of *light*, *sound*, and *motion*.

(Ae would learn these distinctions later).

And it was Ae who moved, because the space didn't respond to em the way spaces outside this little bubble did. Nothing warped around em, bringing em to the next place. A noteworthy difference. And as Ae moved, e kept warping emself, shrinking to observe things from a close-up view, down to the indivisible foundations as they shook according to their nature, and expanding to a wider view to see how those waves fit together to form even bigger and more complicated waves that had structure and cohesion.

Waves that formed *substance*. Structures that had *mass* and *matter*.

(Again, Ae would learn these terms later. At first, e merely experienced their existence.)

Ae explored these new things—experienced and observed their qualities, understood them down to the essence of their nature. Ae didn't need names for that. As always, Ae simply accepted information. That was just what one did. Receive, process, understand. An instantaneous transaction of information. But the things Ae encountered did not understand Ae in return. Ae could tell that there was something lacking in the vibrations here that Infinitians had, something in their essence that could recognize an other. All these things, these energies, they

existed, but not the way Ae did, not with . . . awareness. Their essence was action, an intricate web of forces pulling and pushing and reacting with each other, but no *thought*. No desire or pleasure. No sense of *self*. They did what they did not with an instinctual drive toward contentment but a mechanical impulse to follow the flow of forces.

This was new, and Ae accepted the information. But there was no real mystery in it, nothing stimulating that attracted Ae's attention further, so it was a simple thing to keep moving. Ae traveled, experiencing the textures of space, feeling the texture of different waves from *gravity* and *stars* and moving *planets* and burning ice as they rubbed against eir own essence.

This was also where Ae first came to learn the thing that humans call *time*, because everything was in such delicate balance. Forces acted on each other in sequences, leading to other forces in response—*cause* and *effect*. Ae could observe these sequences and see that they had to be so, that this was the way of this place, its fundamental operation, which allowed the whole to exist as it did, the grand scale of the symphony built by the most infinitesimal components. Smaller vibrations produced bigger vibrations produced even bigger, more complex vibrations. Ae had encountered nothing like it in the Infinite, but no matter how grand and delicate and complex these vibrations were, an Infinitian was still a more *engaging* vibration by comparison.

Still, it was . . . interesting.

*(Interesting.*

Such a vague word.

Vagueness, a feature of language, where a word can have a spectrum of meanings, even contradictory meanings, and you don't know which one is intended unless you ask the speaker. A rather inconvenient way to communicate, but also . . . interesting. It could

be annoying to not be always completely understood, but maybe the journey to reach an understanding—and the mistakes along the way—could be fun.

Maybe.)

There may not have been wonder in it, but it was interesting. As long as there was something new to encounter, Ae kept exploring, passing through the tight web of other vibrations. Ae made it from one end to another, then circled back around and began spiraling from the edges toward the center. So many new things. Nothing surprising—everything was a product of the space's fundamental forces, which Ae now understood—but still new. Ae didn't think ahead, didn't search for things that were theoretically possible given the space's structure, only accepted what actually was.

And then, Ae came across the most *splendid* cacophony.

It came from one of the masses—with its own unique textured waves of gravity, motion, and energy—which was *full* of vivid, complex essences all collected together, vibrations that carried the familiar sense of *consciousness*. It definitely was not a pleasant thing to experience, but it drew Ae's attention.

E warped emself so that e was smaller in comparison to the mass and went down to its surface. The cacophony shrunk with em, the warp changing the range Ae experienced at one time. And Ae traveled around this particular mass, sweeping through and rubbing against so many of those essences—millions of them, *billions* of them—experiencing the unique textures of each. And sometimes there was a response when the other essence noticed the encounter, but very rarely. It seemed as if these essences weren't sensitive enough to detect every other essence the way Ae was used to.

So, Ae learned, while these essences had the same conscious quality of Infinitians, they weren't the same. They still lacked other qualities. And at the same time, Ae noticed they were tied to something else, anchored down inseparably to a small mass. Unlike the free-flowing Infinitians, their movement was severely limited, as was their perception. Ae's essence was not one they were equipped to sense as readily as other vibrations.

So again, Ae was not received the way e could receive them, but that wasn't a bother. It was just different. And unlike in the other parts of this universe, each of these essences had a unique flavor. They weren't just mechanical forces pulling and pushing, they had vibrations of *thought* and *emotion* and *self* that could only be found in their one point of existence. Experiencing so many unique things provided Ae an amount of stimulation e didn't find in the Infinite.

Which was not to say that each essence was *pleasant*. Only that they gave Ae something to experience. The same was true of other Infinitians. Their essences were mere stimulation, a vibration against which Ae's own vibration could play. But experiencing those essences once was always enough. They didn't provide any incentive to make Ae seek it out again.

And then everything changed.

It started off faint, at a distance, but even so Ae could tell: it was *good*. Ae was catching the thinnest drift of those waves as they spread out, and the sensation they caused caught em like a hook. Ae had to—*had* to—find the source. It was as strong as the mechanical forces of the universe, pushing and pulling, cause and effect, but also conscious, an impulse of *need*. Ae swam upstream through the waves, the sensation getting stronger as they grew bigger, the volume getting steadily louder, the vibrations getting steadily deeper, the rhythm getting clearer, the whole experience getting better and better.

And then Ae found it.

The source was a lone essence that to Ae catalyzed a sense of radiance, of awe, each beat flashing against em like shimmering iridescence repeated in a hall of mirrors. Ae didn't just feel the essence, e felt something in emself *respond*. Something . . . *deep*. And that profound *something* made Ae feel the full expanse of eir own essence, a whole universe enraptured. Ae was enormous, and still there wasn't enough. Ae wanted to become more so that e could feel more, to spread out and multiply and bathe in this essence so, so much more.

Ae came closer and closer, compelled by the *need*, and merged eir essence directly with this new one.

What that was like . . .

What it *felt* like . . .

Oh . . .

Ae had passed a cluster of black holes and had watched them whirl around each other until they collided. The impact had been tremendous, the ripples massive and violent, the magnitude of energy going in and out extreme.

Ae felt like one of those black holes.

Like e was exploding, not just once, but constantly, caught at the climax of explosion and rendered almost unbearably bright and loud.

But e wanted to bear it. Ae wanted to endure, because it was *glorious* too. Suddenly the rest of Ae's existence up until this moment was cast in a new perspective, placed against this moment for comparison, and it all seemed miserably dull. How had Ae ever been content before now? Not knowing had been the necessary key to accepting eir own existence as it was. Not knowing that it was possible to feel this *brilliant*.

But Ae knew now. Ae knew what it was like to feel the rhythms of another essence stream through eir own and find depths there Ae hadn't known existed. No, depths that hadn't

existed until the right waves pushed their way in and *made* them—and *filled* them. Ae felt full, so full. Yet hungry. The longer it went, the fuller and hungrier e felt.

Beautiful. Incredible. Profound. Transcendent.

In the mixture of their essences, Ae received more than just the experience itself. Words, an entire language, flooded into eir understanding, and some of those words rose to the surface, small pinpricks that gave a blurry glimpse into the universe storming on the other side of the veil. Words alone would never be good enough, but they were still . . . *interesting*.

But what Ae *really* wanted to know was everything about this essence.

This essence, Ae discovered, that had something called a *name*. A way to identify the essence inside this thing called *language*. One word that carried inside it years of life and experience and personality and emotion and thought, all composed together into piercing beats and rhythms that scathed Ae's senses ecstatically raw.

Cory.

\*

A story came through in that instant, whole and clear. There was no distance to it as with a memory or a movie. Ae experienced it, in full, through Cory's eyes, feeling everything he felt, everything he thought. *Everything*. Even things Cory couldn't have consciously remembered.

For the first time, Ae experienced birth. Strangely, the passage from a small, cozy world into another was a kind of trauma, much more overwhelming than it had been for Ae to enter this universe from the outside. From there, the world grew both more familiar and more strange. Every new thing learned came with a dozen questions and mysteries.

Cory's earliest memory—the one he could actually remember—was from when he was three. Driven by curiosity, and loneliness, he went to his mother, Carolyn, who sat working at her massive desk.

“Mommy?”

“What?” she asked without looking.

“Can I have a brother?”

Carolyn looked at him then, and the image of her flush-faced fury had never left him.

“Can you have a brother? Can you have a *brother*?” She seemed to be demanding something from him, but Cory was suddenly too tight to move or speak. And she didn’t wait for him to answer anyway. “Are you kidding me? Fuck no! Do you have *any* idea how much it fucking *sucks* to be pregnant?”

Cory hadn’t known the question would strike a nerve. But then again, Carolyn’s nerves seemed always ready to react to anything. That was one of the things he had learned early on.

“Of course you don’t,” she spat. “I didn’t either before it happened to me! No one ever told me! No one warned me how fucking *awful* it would be! *You!*” She stabbed a finger toward him. “You put me through *agony*! For *months*! And then when you were actually born, you put me through the worst pain of my entire *life!*”

Cory felt helpless, feeling small against his mother’s anger and burdened with the weight of his own enormous guilt for her suffering.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, shaking and about to cry. “I didn’t mean to.”

Carolyn dismissed him with an impatient wave.

“If I had known about all that, I would *never* have had a kid. But I had you. I can’t do anything about that. But I swear to fucking *god* I’m never going to relive that. *Ever*. All this sunshine-and-rainbows *bullshit*”—she said this with a such a vicious sneer it made Cory flinch—“about motherhood is just a scam to trick women into having babies. They tell you you’ll *fall in love* with the kid while they’re growing inside you,” she said in a derisive sing-song. “You’ll feel *so close* to the baby and want to *hold* it and *sing* to it and get excited to meet it. But it’s not like

that!” The *bang!* as she suddenly struck her desk made Cory flinch again. “It feels like there’s an alien inside you! A fucking parasite leeching away all your energy and making you feel like shit. Why the *fuck* doesn’t anyone ever talk about *that*, huh?”

There was no one else in the room, so all the resentment and anger Carolyn had bundled up inside toward all the people who had not prepared her came out against the only available target. Cory didn’t understand that until later though, so in that moment, like in so many others, he stood there, wanting to break apart and disappear, wishing his mother’s loud voice would burn him out of existence the way it burned his little heart.

“So I told your father,” she continued, pointing at him sharply. “I told him after I had you that I was *never* going through *all that* again. He didn’t argue, and you damn well better not either. Got it?”

Carolyn’s blazing blue eyes demanded an answer, and feebly, his own blue eyes wet with tears, he nodded. “Good,” she said flatly. And Cory knew, he just *knew* then, as he slunk away, soul-shriveled and shaken, that he was going to be alone forever.

Cory was in kindergarten. He was sitting in the principal’s office, waiting in a chair that was too big for him. A few minutes ago, the principal, a short man named Mr. Turner, had called Carolyn to have her come pick Cory up. As he had said on the phone, Cory had been “disruptive” and “violent.”

That had been his first mistake, interrupting Carolyn while she was busy. Cory had learned already to *never* do that and had warned the stupid adult it was a bad idea. But he didn’t listen, and Cory had been able to hear her voice through the phone, even from the other side of Mr. Turner’s desk, demanding to know why he was calling her while she was working. *I told you*, he thought.

The second mistake had been giving her no choice about coming to pick him up. So Cory waited, swinging his legs that weren't long enough to reach the ground, looking forward to getting out of there.

And he heard her before he saw her

He heard her heavy footsteps. Heard her voice as she demanded outside in the hall, "Where is the *fucking* principal's office?" And he could feel the *slam!* of the door in his whole body when she burst in, eyes lit.

Cory listened smugly to everything she said—*screamed*—at Mr. Turner.

"You think I have time for this shit? My life does *not* revolve around this kid! When I drop him off here in the morning, he is *your* fucking problem and *you* need to figure out a way to fucking deal with it! If you can't, then what fucking good are you?"

The idiot deserved it for blaming *Cory* for what had happened back in the classroom. Cory's chest warmed with glee as he watched his mother sweep everything off the large oak desk in one grand motion and stab a finger repeatedly into the horror-struck man's chest.

"Don't you *ever* fucking call me again like this, you hear me? Unless he's being rushed to the hospital, I don't need to know. *You* handle it. Am I *clear*? Am I *fucking clear*?"

Feeling certain that she was, Carolyn spun around and grabbed Cory's hand to drag him out of the office, giving him just enough time to look over his shoulder to the principal and stick his tongue out. Then he walked fast to keep up, holding his head high so that when all the faces peeked through the indoor windows and out of open doors to see what the commotion was, they saw him proud and undefeated.

And holding his mother's hand.

Carolyn pulled him all the way to her car, and when he got in and looked to the building, he could see faces watching from his classroom windows. He sneered at them as Carolyn walked

around to get into the driver's seat, muttering hot curses with barely a pause to breathe. And then Cory felt the roar of the engine in his legs as she revved it, and the tires seemed to screech right into his ears as she raced out of the parking lot.

Out of spite, she didn't take him back to school the rest of the week, and no one called to check on him.

He didn't mind missing school, and he was smart enough to spend those days out of her way while she worked. Easy enough, since she spent all of her time in the room she had made her office, the one tucked away into its own niche upstairs. She seemed much more accepting of his existence when she was pissed off at anyone else, so he made sure to not do anything that would pull the target back to himself.

When he returned to school, his reputation had been cemented. Teachers and students alike were wary of him, and everyone knew where he got that *anger management problem* from.

It only got worse.

Because apparently earning the reputation as *the* problem child of his entire grade didn't keep some of the other kids from wanting to test him.

Kindergarten still.

His grade got to leave early before any of the others. Many of his classmates walked home. Some rode the bus. Cory got picked up because his mother would drive him straight from the school to his piano lessons, which meant he stood in front of the building by himself while everyone else passed him by, excited to get home and watch cartoons or play with each other in the neighborhood streets—or whatever kids with friends did.

Today was different though.

Instead of passing by, his classmates formed a circle around him—with such shared intention it was clear they had planned it. Cory looked around at them and said nothing. Just

waited. And then three boys stepped into the circle to join him. Not to become friends, based on their ugly smiles. One of the boys was taller than Cory, and he used his extra height to exude a threatening air. Cory's heart was already pounding. No one had to say anything for him to understand what was happening, and he couldn't wait for someone to make the first move.

Soon the three boys were hitting and kicking and pushing and pulling him. It was hard to stay on his feet, but Cory managed. As he screamed as loud as he could with his five-year-old lungs, his voice carried over the shouts of the audience, all of whom were cheering for his opponents.

Fuck them.

Fuck *all* of them.

He didn't need anyone to cheer for him. He could drag his way out of hell if he had to, all on his own.

He wrestled on his feet against the three. Even with one trying to jump on his back, another kicking at his leg, and the other jerking his arm, fire kept his body strong enough to stay up.

And then came the screeching tires.

The mob shouts turned to terrified shrieks as Carolyn's car rolled up onto the curb, nearly running into the nearest children before they scattered, exposing Cory and his opponents. Leaving the car running, Carolyn stormed out, a volcano brewing in her chest and lighting up her eyes. Looking right at the boys, who recognized her and jumped to get away from Cory, she sucked in a deep breath and *screeched*.

“YOU FUCKING LITTLE SHITS! GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM MY SON!”

She barreled right toward them, the spectators still watching but from a safer distance. Cory watched too as his mother grabbed one of the boys by his shirt and screamed into his face,

“You little shits better believe I will fucking *slit your throats* the next time I see you anywhere near my son! You *hear* me?”

She jerked him hard.

“Or you know? Maybe I’ll just fucking run you over with my car! You wanna be roadkill? You wanna get crushed under my wheels? I can just *feel* it now. BA-BUM! BA-BUM! And then you’re *pulp* on the asphalt. Sounds *fun*, doesn’t it? Yeah. Yeah it sure fucking *does*. For *me*. So I dare you, I fucking *dare* you to test me on this, you little fucker!”

She shook him again, and then her lips spread into a grotesque smile. She leaned in, and in a voice dripping with bloodlust, she warned, “Maybe I’ll bring your head home with me, then I’ll mount it on my wall. I’m the best interior designer in this goddamn *state*. I can make something magnificent with that ugly face of yours. You hear me? Are you fucking *listening to me?*”

The rage back in her face, she shoved him down onto his back. Then she bent toward him with her whole body, giving her the look of a dragon in Cory’s mind.

“HUH?”

The child scrambled away and everyone else took another step back, fearing she could come after any one of them next. But she just passed her eyes over the crowd, burning a threat into their hearts with her glare, then turned to Cory. “Get in the car.”

And again, Cory strode in front of everyone, head high, because even though his body felt bruised and sore, his ego felt as big as the whole campus.

*Take that you fuckers*, he thought as he sneered at all of them from the front passenger seat, one middle finger raised and pressed against the window. *This is what you fucking get when you don’t leave me the hell alone.*

From that moment on, *everyone* knew that his mom was absolutely *psycho* and even more dangerous than Cory himself.

“Fucking little *shits!*” she screamed as she rolled off the curb and sped away from the godforsaken school. “*All* of them! And where the *fuck* are the goddamn teachers? Why the fuck aren’t they around to do something? *Fuck* I’d love to scare the shit out of all of them! Fucking bastards!”

Cory didn’t say anything. He gave her all the space to rant and rant about how everyone *else* was worthless shit. As she did, he could almost pretend that she felt that way because she loved him and wasn’t going to tolerate anyone belittling or threatening her beloved child.

But he couldn’t even believe it in a fantasy.

She didn’t love him. She just wasn’t going to tolerate anyone disrespecting him, because that was an indirect way of disrespecting *her*. No one disrespected her.

“I don’t know if any of them fear God, but I’ll be damn sure they’re all afraid of *me*.”

Her knuckles were white as she gripped her steering wheel. Her breath was loud and hot. Her jaw was tight and her teeth bared. And then she looked at Cory.

Even though she wasn’t screaming at him, he couldn’t help but be on edge. The physical memory of being her victim was always humming in his mind and stomach, ready to release fear at the right trigger. He flinched seeing her blazing eyes turn onto him.

“Don’t you *ever* let them mess with you,” she said, taking a hand off the wheel to point hard at him. “You do just like you did. You fight as hard as you fucking can and you knock them out if you get the chance. You scratch their eyes out or bite off some skin or stomp on their throat. You do whatever it fucking takes to show them you’re a monster from hell and that you’ll fucking kill them if they don’t leave you the fuck alone. Don’t you ever let a bully get away with shit, especially if no one else is going to step in for you. Got it?”

Cory felt a little lost. His mother was looking at him right in the eye, telling him in no uncertain terms to defend himself, to stand up and knock down anyone who tried to hurt him. He liked hearing it. It made him feel good and powerful. It made him excited. He had *permission* to fight anyone who harassed him. Which he had been doing anyway, because it felt good.

But it felt good because he couldn't do it at home.

When his mother screamed at him. When she broke things in the house out of anger. When she made him feel small and weak, he didn't know how to fight back. He didn't know how to stand up for himself against her.

Why would she say something like that to him, without any conditions or qualifiers, as if she didn't realize she was the worst of them all? How could she say that as if she didn't know she was the only one who could ever really hurt him? Even though she never hit him, he felt worse under the assault of her verbal anger than he would have felt if the entire class had been beating him together.

He didn't know how to say any of that though, and he was afraid that if he did have the words, saying them would only turn her anger back to him. He didn't want that. She probably wouldn't even see the irony of her command if she did start screaming at him a second later.

So he just nodded.

"I got it."

"Good," she said with a nod and turned her eyes back to the road. "Fucking worthless little *shits!* You ought to knock their goddamn teeth out."

The next day, Cory was in the principal's office again. And Carolyn was there too—again.

They had both been called in to discuss what had happened and how "concerning" the fight yesterday was.

“It’s just not good for Cory to be starting so many fights,” Mr. Turner said with a tone of voice that implored Carolyn to see reason.

She scrunched her face in disgust.

“What the fuck makes you think *Cory* started any of them?”

“Well, *he’s* the only one who’s in all of them.”

Carolyn sneered, unimpressed.

“And?”

“And . . . if he’s the common factor, that leads me to believe he’s the one causing the problem.”

Carolyn snorted.

“Fuck. Did you ever stop and think maybe the common factor is that all the other shitty brats here are trying to pick on him?”

Mr. Turner was visibly uncomfortable.

“Well, given Cory’s attitude, he’s the one who seems more likely to start a fight.”

“His *attitude*? Maybe he’s pissed off all the time because he knows all the other kids in his class are shit and he hates coming here. You ever think about that?”

“Ma’am, would you please calm down?”

“No, I will *not* fucking calm down when you’ve called me in here *again* to tell me my kid is a problem without any fucking evidence. I saw what was going on yesterday. Three—you hear me? *Three!* Three boys were trying to knock my son down while a whole circle of little shits were cheering them on. You’re going to tell me that happened because my son started it? Not because all those other kids are fucking assholes?”

“Ma’am, please—”

“Don’t you ‘ma’am’ me, dammit! Listen to me! I’m not going to let any kid at this school get away with causing trouble for my son. If anyone starts a fight with Cory, I hope he knocks them down good and hard, since none of *you* seem interested in lifting a goddamn finger to help him.”

“That’s no way to handle the situation—”

“And what exactly is *your* way of handling it? Stand by and do nothing when there’s a fight going on with *kindergarteners*? Fucking *kindergarteners*? And then blame the victim?”

“Cory’s hardly a victim. Look at him, he’s barely even bruised. Meanwhile, the other three boys have scratches and bruises all over them.”

“*Good!* Serves them right!”

“It’s *not* good! Mrs. Rhys, even if Cory didn’t start any of these fights, that is no excuse to respond with this kind of behavior. Violence is not the answer!”

“Oh it is *absolutely* the answer! Bullies won’t learn from anything else!”

“That is not true. Cory should come to a teacher if another student is behaving inappropriately toward him.”

“And why should he do that? What the fuck are any of you people going to do at that point if you won’t even step in to stop a fight?”

“We *will* step in. Teachers will address the student before things escalate, but once Cory instigates a serious fight, then he’s the one who will get in trouble.”

“You see what you just did here? You just acknowledged that Cory is *responding* to something. He’s not just going around starting fights with any little dipshit he passes. He’s being *provoked*. *Those* kids are the ones starting the fight, Cory’s just giving them what they deserve.”

The principal shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter who starts the fight or how. What matters is who takes it too far.”

Carolyn's nostrils flared and her lips tightened. Cory tensed himself in preparation, and then she screamed.

"How *dare* you say it doesn't matter!"

She screamed so loud and fast that the principal didn't have a chance to interrupt, not even when she paused to suck in a quick breath.

"Who starts it *absolutely* matters! Because one side makes an *attack* and one side is *defending* themselves. It's basic cause and effect. We don't tell one country they're not allowed to retaliate when another country attacks them. We declare fucking *war* on that country! We don't tell a victim to just ignore an attack! We don't tell them to just wait it out until the aggressor gets bored! Because we know that's not how it works! Bullies *love* easy targets! You have to *defend* yourself against bullies to make them stop! They have to see there are fucking *consequences*! You can't treat both sides as morally equal! And if that's the message you're teaching around here, then *I* have to teach my son that both sides are *not* the same and that he has *every* fucking right to fight back when someone attacks him! I'm not going to let you teach him this passivity bullshit! So if you don't want Cory getting into any more fights, then you better fucking step in when some kid tries to start shit with him!"

Mr. Turner looked dumbfounded.

Cory too felt confused, but for different reasons.

Because again, he didn't know what his mother meant. Was she saying he had a right to defend himself against *her* when *she* bullied him, in her own way? Or, did she just honestly not realize that she was a bully? He didn't know how she couldn't realize it, it was so obvious to him. But he also understood by now that his mom was bizarre, even to other adults. No one seemed to understand her or know how to deal with her, at least not that Cory had seen. So if she didn't make sense, that must just be the way she was.

The meeting ended with Cory being sent home again.

In the car, Carolyn waited to start the engine so she could look at him with a serious face.

“Do you know why I want you to be able to defend yourself and fight your own bullies?”

Cory plucked at his shorts.

“Because they deserve it?”

Bad guys got what they deserved, that was what justice meant. And it had sounded like she wanted bullies to get justice, one way or another.

“There’s that,” she agreed. “But also, it’s because if you can take care of yourself, then I don’t have to think about you. I need you to show all these kids that you will knock the shit out of them if they mess with you, that way you won’t need any help from me and I can focus on my own life and my own work. If you get in trouble with the school, that’s fine because I can tell them to leave me alone. But if other kids are causing problems? I’m going to have to show up and put them in their place. So you need to save me the trouble and take care of them yourself, just like you’ve been doing.”

It was the closest thing to a compliment Cory could ever hope for. He was doing well. His mother was acknowledging that he was doing something right. His chest throbbed with yearning for more. He nodded vigorously.

“I will,” he said. “I promise. If anyone messes with me, I’ll knock the shit out of them myself!”

Carolyn reached out and ran her hand once through his hair then patted his head.

“Good. All right, it’s too early to go to piano yet, so let’s get some gelato. Then you can go shopping with me. Ok?”

Cory nodded fast, and as she turned the key and revved the engine, Cory curled his hands into fists on his thighs. He wanted to feel her hand in his hair again, but he didn’t know how to

make it happen. Instead he just kept in all the pressure he felt behind his eyes and in his chest by holding his breath as long as he could.

October 8, 1995. Sunday.

Cory's seventeenth birthday was next month, and tomorrow was his mother's forty-first. Her birthdays weren't known for being enjoyable—for anyone. She always had high expectations that were somehow never fully met. Even when she told Cory and his father Christopher exactly what she wanted, even when they followed through with every detail, somehow it just wasn't right. But they had to keep trying because they were sure anything less than their best effort would turn out so much worse.

Cory was out in the dark, wandering around, trying to mentally prepare himself for whatever might come. The neighborhood trails were quiet since it was past the time most people did their routine runs or dog-walks. On his own, he felt almost peaceful. He was tempted to stay up all night to hold back the next day as long as possible. He wanted music, but it was too late to play his piano or guitar. He could listen with his headphones in his room, but he wanted to put his body into a creation. He wanted to let out his voice. That was how he could truly immerse himself and escape into the one world that actually made sense.

Well, even if he couldn't go all the way there now, at least it would be there to lift him out of whatever pit Carolyn's mood dragged them into.

For now, he sauntered down the sidewalk that connected the branches of little streets sparsely populated with some of the nicest homes in the area. He listened to his music in his head, nodding along with the lyrics he murmured softly. When he got to the spot where the sidewalk turned into a bridge, he veered off to go down into the ditch so he could follow the creek into the woods. The eerie darkness wrapped around him in welcome and as he pushed deeper in, his humming and singing growing louder.

And then he found his usual stop, a tall tree that had fallen onto its side, creating a long stage for him to walk across, back and forth. He hopped up, and his humming turned to into a concert.

“I’m struggling just to breathe, cause there’s so much pressure building up inside of me. I’m so angry all the time, but I’d rather be alone and losing my mind, than be like you. So go on and say I’m wrong, keep me stuck down on my knees, but if I’m the one who’s sick, it’s cause you’re the fucking disease!”

The trees were the only audience he could tolerate since they stood by silently, giving no opinion, making no distraction. He wasn’t interested in performing for anyone, he just had a lot inside he needed to get out. So he rocked his head. He jumped and stomped with each landing. He swung his fists and gestured sharply with the heaviest beats. He bent forward with mouth wide for a scathing roar.

And then he jumped off the tree and landed hard on the ground, feeling like he had enough power in him to quake the city. And as the instrumental played in his mind he bobbed his head, black hair flowing in waves around his face. His fingers moved against the air to play the strings he could hear, bringing the song to its close.

He didn’t get to finish.

His head was on the upswing, heel about to tap, the next notes ready in his fingers, when a new sensation flooded him so thoroughly in an instant that he gasped. Oh *fuck*. He was drowning. That’s what it felt like. But not just in his lungs, in every part of him. An anchor dragged him through an ocean of memories, replaying his whole life with oppressive speed. In seconds, he remembered every detail, everything he had ever seen, had ever heard, ever tasted and smelled. He saw once more every face that had ever looked at him—all the quick turns to look away, the judging stares, the sideways glances during whispered gossip, the wariness and

fear and scorn. And among them were all the faces his mother showed depending on her mood. It was all suddenly just *there*, right there on the surface of his consciousness. Everything he had ever felt, everything he had ever thought, all the pressure of all his anger right there, right there in his chest crushing his lungs so hard he couldn't breathe.

*“Get the fuck away from me. God, I  
can't even look at you right now!”*

He tried to gasp, but he couldn't get anything past the tightness in his throat. And he couldn't see because his eyes were running with tears he couldn't control. It was too much. Too much. He had to be dying.

*“I don't fucking want a kid! What the fuck am I supposed to do with a goddamn  
kid? They can't do anything, and they can't talk about anything that  
matters. Kids aren't even smart enough to how dumb they are!”*

He didn't want to die. Even remembering how alone he had always been, how shitty it felt being in the shitty world, he still wanted to live. Partly out of spite—he wasn't going to leave just to make everyone else more comfortable—but partly because he had things he liked about being alive. He loved music way too much to give it up for anyone else's sake. They didn't deserve that. He still had so much left in him to create that it was worth sticking around.

Especially since there wasn't anything waiting for him on the other side—at least he hoped not. He couldn't believe in any kind of god, and it felt better to believe there was no god than to think that there was one who just sat around doing nothing for anyone. So that meant if he died, it was over. Everyone else would be happy to not have him around anymore, and all his music would be left unmade.

He didn't want that.

*“Cory, I'm busy. I just got you a goddamn bike, go literally*

*anywhere else.” He could practically hear her think, “And don’t come back. Get run over for all I care.”*

But he couldn’t imagine surviving this.

His life squeezed his body like hands wringing a rag tight to get the water out. It *hurt*. Fuck, it hurt so goddamn *much*! His chest, his throat, his stomach, several tons were weighing each down. Only the gravity of the earth’s core could force almost seventeen years into the tiny hand-held space of a few seconds.

*“If I’m being honest? I agree with your mom. I never wanted kids. I only had one because there’s so much pressure to ‘keep the family name alive’. I should have just left that to Richard. He’s got plenty of kids to take care of that.”*

He collapsed to his knees, finally dragging in a breath loud as nails against chalkboard, and right after it came a wail. He fell forward, rolled his forehead against the ground, his mouth wide as he kept struggling to breathe. His lungs were fighting against too much pressure. Every breath in was painful. Every breath out was a sound of agony. He couldn’t stop crying.

*“Having you was our mistake, so we have to accept the consequences of that.”*

Fuck, fuck, fuck! Shut the fuck up dad!! Don’t talk like you’re so fucking reasonable! Fuck fuck fuck—

*“But you’d make it a lot easier on both of us if you just stayed out of our way.”*

—fuck fuck fuck fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck—

*“We’ll give you what you need, but beyond that, live your own life. Ok?”*

—fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckFUCKFUCKFUCK—!!!!!!

He dropped to his side, the tears still pouring out even with his eyes closed. His mouth was still wide open. Inhale, loudly. Exhale, sobbing. His body wanted to move, so he rocked in all directions, and he tangled his hair with his fingers.

*“I HATE YOU! I FUCKING HATE YOU! FUCKING SHIT YOU’RE  
THE WORST THING THAT’S EVER HAPPENED TO ME!”*

He wanted to say “stop,” but the most he could get out was a thick sob. He was going to break from the inside out. His heart and lungs were going to burst from the sides when the weight pushed the centers too flat, and then the rest of his body would follow. He could feel it. Someday the crushed pulp of his body would be found in this forest, probably when the city finally decided the land was worth more as business and real estate than as protected natural space. He could just imagine the indifferent look on his mother’s face upon seeing his chewed bones, and he could only fight it by clawing into the dirt with one hand and into his scalp with the other.

And then he felt the change.

It took a few seconds for his body to process the difference, but eventually he realized that the weight and pressure were no longer outside forces pushing down around him, trying to condense him into a speck. It was transforming into an *outward* pressure. He wasn’t breaking from being crushed, he was breaking now because something inside was too big and needed more space to expand.

He could breathe again, because his lungs felt like they were full. Too full, even after he exhaled. He rolled onto his back to give them more space to rise, and as he looked up to the sky past the leaves and branches, tears streaming down his temples, it wasn’t his own life he was remembering—*reliving*—anymore.

He experienced things—so many things, millions of years of things—that he didn’t have words to name or describe. But it was ok. He understood it all anyway. He understood it because the mind he shared through the experience understood it. Words weren’t necessary. He wasn’t

seeing, because this form didn't have eyes. He didn't hear, because it didn't have ears. He didn't smell or taste.

He could feel though.

Not through hands or flesh. He felt everything like waves. Vibrations. Like . . . like music.

It rippled through him. Everything. Everything he encountered, the very space he passed through, it all had a *texture*. The closest comparison he could think to make was to songs, to the sensation of sound waves sinking into his body when he put his hands to speakers. Some spaces were thicker, their vibrations heavier and more complex, while some spaces were thinner, like a single note whispering through the strings that formed the space's matrix.

And some spaces were empty. But even there, the sensation of his own vibrations gave him something to experience, and often it was better to be in those empty spaces and just enjoy his own natural song than be distracted by something less beautiful.

So Cory explored the universe, swimming through different songs, liking some places more than others, feeling a kind of compatibility with some and an internal propulsion to get away from others. Alone but never lonely.

In his own life, Cory had always been alone. Not even being surrounded by people changed that. He had accepted he would continue to be alone long, long ago. In fact, he preferred it. Even when loneliness hurt, at least it was honest. He would rather feel the ache of having no one than an ache from trying to pretend any friendships he had weren't unsatisfying.

But here, that ache didn't exist. Despite being alone, this mind was at peace. Not with acceptance, but with genuine calm, because it didn't even occur to it to think about being alone. It didn't think to want anything different. It existed, it moved on its own, it experienced, and it never once wondered what could be different. Its peace wasn't the result of comparing what it

had against what it *didn't* or *couldn't* have and then choosing to be content, it was the result of not thinking about anything at all except for exactly what was. If loneliness was a longing for something different, for something more, then it was impossible to feel for a mind that only experienced the moment.

Cory clung to that peace desperately and breathed.

His mind experienced the unfathomable, time that broke out of time and space that broke out of space, uncountable and undefinable and uncontainable. He could breathe, but he lost his sense of it. He lost feeling of his body completely. His lungs worked on their own, so small now, so microscopic compared to the vastness he felt around him, that he couldn't even find them anymore.

His body—that tiny little thing in that tiny little city in that tiny little world in that tiny little universe in that tiny little sphere of *infinity*—he didn't need it anymore. How could he possibly go back to it, now that he had felt this? Felt this . . . this *abundance*? Felt himself as part of it?

He had become too big, he had become what he was supposed to be. He could feel it. He could *breathe*. Not with lungs, but with the wholeness of himself. And it felt so *good*.

Then he found a curious little pocket, warped himself to fit inside, traveled through its mucousy atmosphere, thick as an egg white with energy vibrations, until he found a curious planet clamoring with so much music he couldn't help but come closer. He circled around it a dozen times, until one song caught him. The impact was like an asteroid, *crash!* The whole of him shaken to the core. He followed it, shivering in response as it grew louder, heavier. For the first time, Cory felt hunger, *need*. He *needed* this song. He ached with need. He came closer and closer and finally merged himself with the irresistible rhythm to feel it touch the very center of his being.

Cory couldn't stop crying.

All he could see was blurry black, and he couldn't move his body, only feel it shiver uncontrollably against the solid ground. With every deep breath, his chest rose and fell, a motion only broken by the occasional stuttering gasp. He felt spent, but at the same time, overwhelmingly exhilarated. He couldn't think, not in words, not anymore, not right now. His mind was buzzing. His soul was buzzing. He cried and cried because it was such a euphoric relief to feel it: he had become so much more.

Everything that had been scrunched up like tight origami to be able to fit inside his body had just unfolded, and now he found himself split between that small body and the glowing nebula that hovered like a fog above the leafy, autumn-colored earth.

And he wasn't alone.

Another nebula was with him, shimmery, rolling like clouds with space dust and diamond stars caught inside. And the most beautiful, intoxicating vibrations he had ever felt, strumming through him like a symphony, pushing the boundaries of his soul even further. He welcomed the expansion, because he needed there to be more of him with which to feel this delicious song.

It was so beautiful—so utterly, overwhelmingly beautiful—he *couldn't stop crying*. Not with his body's eyes, and not with the stings of his nebula soul. Instead of tears, it cried a deep tune like violins and cellos in mourning, and the second soul responded with a tune of its own, piercing Cory's heart. It was too much, just too much beauty.

He needed to keep growing. He was still too small to hold all the feeling he had.

So his soul deepened. Rather than expanding out to take up more space, the space inside him fractaled, becoming ever-increasing layers of magnification so that every part contained within it another infinity.

His rolling boil didn't have to overflow now, there was just enough of him to contain the whole of it. Ecstasy ebbed into a humming calm and he could finally close his eyes.

For a minute, he just lay there and breathed. It was easier now. No more stuttering or shuddering or gasping. The air flowed smoothly, in and out. And at the same time, he felt the hum of the air against his nebula, the character of the forest as it sang its haunting melody. It was a soothing background, but his focus, really, was on the symphony. It filled him, catalyzing a reaction, a gushing over which he had no control.

A dozen songs appeared in his mind at once. He could hear them all so clearly, he could feel their details and the exact timing of their movements. They were songs he had felt the inklings of earlier while brainstorming, songs he had drafted, trying to expand them beyond a line of lyrics or a few notes of a chorus or intro. Songs he had known were in him somewhere if only he could figure out the part that came next.

And here they were, an entire bundle of them, completed and ready for him to record. They were all so beautiful, and the shiver he felt running through the other nebula told him it agreed. Because it felt them too. It could feel everything about him, just as he could feel everything about it.

He didn't need to ask, "Who are you?" It didn't have a name anyway, but even if it had, a name wouldn't have made a difference. Cory knew its *soul*. Cory knew it by the texture of its full being. No name could capture that, just as he knew "Cory" wasn't enough to capture everything he was. Neither of them needed a name, not with each other, not after the millions of years they had just lived together.

And it wasn't just that they knew everything about each other—anyone could *know* things. It was the vibrations. It was the way they each *felt*, the way the other's existence made

them feel. It wasn't something that could be learned or taught, it was just a natural sensation. A natural reciprocity.

They had heard each other and, in an instant, become each other's favorite song.

//How long will you stay?// Cory wanted to know.

The other nebula felt the question vibrate in Cory's soul and responded in kind.

//I don't know that I could ever leave.//

Cory sighed, relief rising into the chaotic rush of everything else. They had both been alone, neither one seeking to change. But just like that, they had become addicted to each other, and nothing else, no other experience could compare. On the hierarchy of needs, this feeling stretched from the bottom-most primal to the highest of self-actualization, encompassing the whole.

For Cory, this was as good as it had to be for company to be better than solitude, so why would he have ever expected to find it? But by some miracle, here it was, and he could live another million years immersed in this song without ever getting bored. In fact, if he lost it, he was sure his soul would deflate, and the withdrawal would be too much to survive.

But that was ok. Because for the first time, as he lay there, his back getting damp and dirty against the ground, the universe didn't feel distant or hostile. The universe was open to him now, and he opened himself in return. Later he would wonder why it couldn't have been this way sooner, but for tonight, he let the first-time high engulf him, and he simply wept.

### CHAPTER 3

Knocking pulled Cory back up out of their soul space.

“Cory?”

Carolyn’s voice was muffled behind the door. She never opened it herself, which xe appreciated, but it wasn’t because she respected xir privacy. It was just because Cory’s room was the only one in the whole house not maintained in a carefully planned design. That was why Carolyn was happy for xem to keep it closed, hiding the blemish among her pristine portfolio.

“Honey, are you up?”

Oh god, she was calling xem “honey.” Which meant she was in a good mood today. Xe exhaled, already feeling a year’s worth of rest and bliss shed from xir soul with premature exhaustion.

“Yeah, I’m awake,” xe answered in a thick voice as xe sat up in bed. Xe ran xir fingers through xir hair and saw the alarm clock on the nightstand announcing 6:28 AM in ominous red digits.

“Oh great. I was thinking we could have a date today, just you and me. You could come with me while I take care of some shopping, and we can go out for lunch, and maybe a movie. What do you think?”

She had such excitement and hope in her voice. Xe could picture her leaning sideways toward the door, shoulders tensed and ear focused, awaiting xir answer. Cory looked down at Ae, who had eir body lounging on eir back with one arm bent behind eir head as a cushion. E looked up at Cory with eir gold eyes and held up eir other arm, making it stretch like soft clay until eir fingers could reach xir hair and comb it neatly behind xir ear. Completely unnecessary, but it gave Cory a pleasant tingle in xir spine.

And it helped xem keep xir voice neutral when xe answered with the reminder, “I’ve got school.”

Carolyn replied quickly, eager to convince xem.

“I’ll just call and tell them you’re sick.”

It wasn’t that Cory actually wanted to go to school. Spending the day with xir mother just wasn’t an appealing alternative. But then again, denying her what she wanted would turn her into her other self, and that wasn’t any better. Cory didn’t know which version of her was worse, really. They were totally different, but each was a pain in her own way.

So xe decided to take the opportunity to start the morning without being screamed at.

“Yeah, ok. Sure. Sounds fun.”

Xe could feel Carolyn’s smile through the door, its giddy vibrations raising the hairs on xir neck.

“Great! And why don’t we stop somewhere and get breakfast too?”

Cory rubbed xir eyes.

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

“Ok, great! Think you can be ready in thirty minutes?”

“Yeah. No problem. I’ll be down soon.”

“Ok! Meet you in the kitchen.”

“Yeah.”

Cory listened to xir mother’s footsteps, quick with excitement, and vaguely hoped her mood would die down in the time it took xem to get ready. That happened sometimes. But if it didn’t, then xe would spend the entire day taking bets with xemself about how much longer her high would last.

Cory took one more deep breath to get xemself mentally prepared to start moving, then xe threw up the sheets and set xir feet on the carpet. Xe closed the door behind xem on xir way down the hall to the bathroom, took a ten-minute shower, combed xir hair, then went back to xir own room.

Ae had made the bed and was now waiting on the chair at Cory's desk, feet pulled up and ankles crossed, arms wrapped around bent legs, looking impeccable, hair still glossy and neat and clothes willed clean. It was easy to feel jealous of Ae and eir perfect control over eir physical appearance. To Ae, the body was a pure costume, one e could manipulate on a whim. Eir physical substance responded to eir will, morphing into whatever e imagined with the same ease that Cory flexed xir fingers.

Cory hadn't mastered that. Actually, xe hadn't managed to make any progress with it at all. It was why they were still here, living this life. If xir exposure to Ae had granted xem the same ability to dissolve xir human form and fly out with Ae into the Infinite, xe would have left that first night. But there were still some limits xe hadn't been able to overcome.

(Yet. Hopefully.)

Xe was now aware of xir essence, those vibrations that formed xir fundamental *self*, and like Ae xe could spread it outward from xir body and use it to feel things beyond the usual human senses. But xir enlightenment must have been incomplete, because xe still couldn't change the parts of xemself that were formed by mass and matter. Xe couldn't change the kinds of vibrations there to a different tune, from the vibrations of atoms and quarks to those of pure self, as Ae so easily could.

Neither of them knew why xe hadn't developed that ability, but it was the first temptation Cory ever felt toward prayer.

//What are *you* going to do?// xe asked—in their usual way. Cory’s essence vibrated like a constant cloud around xir body, and by touching Ae’s with it, meaning passed between them. No need to parse it up into words and tones. Just understanding, pure and complete. Ae received Cory’s meaning as it hummed into em and answered with a few notes of eir own soulspeak.

//Coming with you, of course.//

Cory smiled as xe pulled out the clothes xe was going to wear. That was good, because xe wasn’t going to get through a day with xir mother without Ae’s presence to cushion and smooth the screeching cacophony that Carolyn’s presence evoked, like a caustic irritant. And to help get the day back on a good note . . .

//Show it to me again.//

Ae’s gold eyes lit up like faceted gems reflecting light as a smile crept across eir face. And as Cory pulled everything into place and tied the laces of xir boots, xe felt a deeply satisfying vibration run through the infinity of xir insides as the vision of Bryce’s terror reappeared in xir mind.

//You are magnificent.//

Ae vibrated with a sensation that was too hard to translate effectively into an articulate statement. The best description would probably be that it was the warmth of gratification.

By the time Cory was ready, the clock showed 6:50 AM. With hair still damp and combed straight and slick, xe turned to the door. Behind xem, Ae’s body sublimated from the chair, quick as a snap, leaving only the essence, a shimmery nebula visible and tangible to no one but Cory.

“Wow, you’re ready already?” Carolyn asked when she saw xem enter the kitchen.

“It’s not like it takes me that long.”

“Well that makes one of us,” Carolyn said with a wry smile. Cory wanted to say that she didn’t need to be jealous. It wasn’t like she *needed* to take an extra hour every morning to get ready. If she didn’t put a single touch of makeup on her face, she would still be one of the most beautiful people *xe* had ever seen. Yet even she felt like she couldn’t present herself to the world without some kind of smoothing foundation on her skin, extra life added to her cheeks, exaggerated color to her eyes and lips, and whatever all else that Cory didn’t care to know about.

As far as *xe* was concerned, she was proof that beauty and makeup culture was a seductive trap, promising self-esteem but always at a price. It put so much pressure on people to live up to certain—absurd, unrealistic—expectations and punished them if they didn’t. It made people strive toward unnatural ideals and convinced them that *they* were failures when their efforts didn’t work or their happiness didn’t last. How could people not see how fucking *stupid* it all was? How could people have been so thoroughly duped into believing in any of these bullshit rules for how to just fucking *exist*?

Cory didn’t really need to ask though.

*Xe* knew the answer was tradition, mostly. Tradition people perpetuated themselves and then blithely initiated the next generations into. None of them knew they were trapped in a shared delusion. And if they were confronted with it, they only tightened their grip on it. They were too invested to be willing to change. They *wanted* to believe it, because they were scared to wake up and find themselves alone. They wouldn’t be able to handle looking around and seeing that they were the only one not insane.

But Cory was used to that. It was how *xe* felt every fucking day of *xir* life.

All of that vibrated through Cory in the span of one second, hot and frizzy, but *xe* just mumbled, “Sorry,” as a way to express some kind of sympathy for her plight as a woman

brainwashed by social demands—demands spurred even more by aggressive advertising campaigns promoting an array of products designed to help meet them.

At least *Ae* understood.

*Ae* understood without *xem* even needing to explain. And even better than that, *Ae* *agreed*.

Carolyn smiled and ran her fingers through *xir* damp hair then patted *xir* cheek.

“You’re a sweet kid. Oh and I called the school and told them you woke up sick and I’m taking you to the doctor.” She put on a sly smile, pleased with herself and her successful deception. Cory didn’t tell her it wasn’t that much of an achievement since the school was happy to take any excuse for *xem* to not show up.

“Cool.”

“Mm-hmm. So, you hungry?”

Not really.

“Yeah.”

“How does Hudson’s sound?”

The overpriced, pretentious restaurant that sold one pancake for seven dollars?

“Great.”

“Great! Let’s go be first through the door.”

This time of year, it was still pretty dark out at 7:00 AM. The weather wasn’t too bad, mid-40s, but it was cold enough for Carolyn to keep the top down. She had the updated 1994 version of Cory’s Saab—which was exactly why *xe* had it. The car had been a gift for *xir* sixteenth birthday, a hand-me-down from Carolyn who had timed it that way as an excuse to gift herself an upgrade to the newest model. The main differences really were that Carolyn’s was bright red instead of black, and her car had the optional CD player addition.

Cory didn't know if she used it. Xe didn't know anything about her music tastes. And xe didn't learn anything today because she kept the system off during the drive. Hudson's wasn't far, but it was enough for a conversation Cory didn't really want to have.

"So, honey," she said sweetly at the stop sign separating their neighborhood from the main street. "I've been meaning to ask you."

That could have been an opening for anything, and because Cory defaulted to the assumption that Carolyn had no interest in xem whatsoever, Cory had no idea what to expect.

"What's that," xe said, forcing xir voice to sound neutral.

The car began its turn when she asked, "Are you dating anyone?"

Cory might have laughed if xe didn't feel so dull inside.

"No."

"Really?" She sounded genuinely surprised. "No girlfriend—or boyfriend?" she added quickly. "You can tell me if you have a boyfriend, you know. Or if you *want* a boyfriend. If that's your thing. It doesn't bother me."

"No, mom," xe said, trying not to sound as exhausted as xe felt. "No girlfriend or boyfriend."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Well, I ask because you've been out so late a lot. I can't help wondering what you're up to and who you're with."

"I'm just with the band, practicing or out doing gigs. That's all."

"Oh, that's exciting. Where do you play?"

"We practice at their place and we play anywhere they'll let us. Mostly bars."

"They let you into bars?"

“They do if no one asks how old I am. If one of the other guys shows his ID, they pretty much assume I’m as old as they are.”

“Sneaky,” she said with an approving smile. “How old are the others?”

“They’re like twenty-two, twenty-three.”

“Wow. You must be really good if they’re willing to have a high school student play with them.”

“I guess they think so.”

“Guys in bands are really popular, you know,” she segued slyly. As if he didn’t. “And especially if you’re hanging out that much with older guys, you’ll probably attract a lot of girls. Maybe even some older girls. Do I need to talk to you about being with girls?”

Cory pinched the bridge of his nose.

“God, *no*. Mom. You absolutely do *not* need to talk about that. At all.”

“I just want to make sure everyone involved is safe and we don’t get anyone pregnant. I don’t want any grandchildren.” She realized what she said and amended quickly, “I mean now. Later might be fine but—”

“Mom, seriously,” he cut in. “You do not need to be worrying about that. I can promise you, no grandkids. Ever. I’m not interested in that.”

“You mean that?”

“Yes, I fucking mean it.”

She let out a breath.

“Oh good. I hope that lasts. But look, if you ever start thinking about it or about wanting to be with a girl, you can always come talk to me.”

God, “if.” Maybe leaving the future open with hypotheticals like that was supposed to be comforting, but *fuck*, if Cory *knew* that his feelings on this were never going to change and he

*said* so without a hint of doubt, the hypothetical wasn't reassuring. It was invalidating. Just completely dismissive of xir own assessment of xemself. Why couldn't she just accept what xe was saying and leave it at that? Why did people have to be so goddamn condescending, acting like they knew more about you than you did? *Fuck.*

Cory held in the urge to sigh loudly and roll xir eyes.

"I'm seriously not interested," xe said with restraint. "Not in guys or girls. I have never been anywhere close to having sex and I can *promise* you I never will. I got enough sex ed in school and abstinence will work just great for me. Forever, ok? *Forever.*"

"Ok," she said slowly, her subtle skepticism making Cory grind xir teeth. "But I just want you to know you don't have to be embarrassed to talk to me about this kind of thing."

It was getting harder to keep xir breathing under control.

"Fine, but I'm not embarrassed. I'm just completely not at all interested and I'd rather just not think about it ever."

Finally Carolyn sighed with audible relief.

"Oh my god, you are *the* perfect child. Thank you."

This time when she reached over and put her hand on xir head, Cory suppressed a deep lightning strike of repulsion down to a mere twitch. She had a lot of nerve saying that. *A lot* of nerve. But it pretty much proved how good of a mood she was in to be able to forget how much she hated Cory's existence. Well, it wouldn't last long. Cory could push through it.

Especially since Ae filled up all the space in the car and hummed a tune that made xem feel like a cat being calmed by hands gently stroking through its fur.

They weren't the very first customers through the door, but they were among the first. They got their choice of table and the wait time for their food was a record low. Carolyn liked this place a lot. She thought its clean, modern aesthetic was executed perfectly and often

commented on the good eye of whoever designed it. But she also liked to look at people and comment on them as well.

“Oh, that woman needs to find a better hair stylist.”

“That man has not aged well.”

“She could stand to lose a few pounds. Or a lot.”

Cory felt close to exploding. *Jesus Christ* how could she stand being such a fucking asshole? Hair styles? Aging? Body fat? What the fuck did it matter to her? None of it had anything to do with her! Why couldn't she just let people fucking exist?

Cory looked away at nothing to keep from glaring at her. But of course, she wasn't going to let xem just sit in silence. While she cut neatly into a picturesque crepe colored with berries and drizzled chocolate stripes, which had come paired with a glass of orange juice and a cup of coffee, she tried to get more conversation out of xem.

“How is school going?”

Cory shrugged as xe cut into a thick waffle, probably one of the thickest available in town.

“Same as usual I guess.”

“Which is . . . ?”

Syrup spilled out of the broken squares onto the plate as Cory pushed the cut piece around in small circles. With a dull tone xe elaborated, “Classes are boring, kids are dumb, teachers don't like me, everyone avoids me and I avoid them. I don't do homework because I don't care. I'm not failing anything but my grades aren't great either. Everything seems pointless.”

Xe finally put syrup-soaked waffle in xir mouth while Carolyn nodded vaguely.

“So does that mean no fights recently?”

“Not recently,” xe said before swallowing. “I don’t think I’ve been in a real fight since ninth grade.”

“*Real* fight?”

Cory nodded.

“Yeah. You know, full-on fist fight. There’ve been a few times where some asshole’s tried to start something, like knocking against me in the hall, but I don’t bother with that dumb shit anymore. Unless someone’s being serious about it, I just say fuck it and move on.”

“Well aren’t *you* mature?” she said, actually sounding proud. Cory didn’t know what to do with that, so xe just started cutting into the waffle again.

“Have you thought about college at all?”

Cory shrugged again.

“Not really.”

“Well,” she said, getting back to her crepes, “you should probably start. Your father is talking about how you should do business too, like we did. Then you can start your career at the bank with him.”

Cory was surprised to hear that not only did xir parents talk about xem, but apparently still spoke to each other at all. And had normal, civil conversations.

“I didn’t know dad wanted me around like that.”

Christopher Ryde wasn’t a dangerously mercurial tempest the way Carolyn was, but he wasn’t by any means a better parent. His approach to fathering was ninety-five percent a stay-out-of-it philosophy and five percent asking, “Carolyn, why are you spoiling him so much?”

“He wants you to be successful.”

Xe appreciated that she didn’t try to serve xem some sugar-coated lie. Nothing could make Cory believe Christopher actually felt any affection for his only child. There just wasn’t

any evidence for it. But there was *plenty* of evidence that he preferred spending twelve hours a day at work over engaging with his family. Or really, who knew what all he was doing when he was away from home? And as long as he was bringing in loads of money, it didn't really matter to any of them.

“You mean *rich*,” Cory translated.

“What else would I mean?”

*Oh I don't know, something that actually mattered?*

“I don't know.”

“Do you want to be a rock star? Is that your goal?”

Cory sighed heavily.

“No. I don't want to be famous.”

“Then why are you in a band?”

“Because . . .” Cory lifted a hand in a vague gesture. “I don't know. They needed me.

They lost their lead singer and they needed a replacement. And they heard me sing and liked me and asked if I was interested. And I think we work pretty well together overall. And it gives me a chance to make music.”

Thinking out loud like that, he began to speak seriously.

“That's what I *really* want. I just want to make good fucking music. It's *these* guys that want to get discovered and signed onto a label and get famous. I don't care about that. I just want the *music*. If I could do all of it myself then I fucking would because I get sick of all this talk about hoping there's a scout in the audience and about going on tour and shit. God, shit gets so complicated when there's other people involved. It sucks.”

Xe felt free to vent to Carolyn when it wasn't about *her*. Bad-mouthing others didn't put her on the defensive, so her good mood stayed intact. And if she wanted xem to open up, there was an abundance of frustrations xe could share.

But really, despite the frustration, Cory understood the other guys of the band. They were in a shitty situation, broke and depressed and stuck in life. Getting discovered was their only way out. He couldn't blame them for wanting it. Because xe had such a comfortable life, Cory could afford to be alone and pursue xir true interests in xir own way—along with practically anything else. The disparity wasn't fair and xe could recognize it.

But that only made xem wish that they could find someone else to take xir place. Xe wanted them to get unstuck and rise to all the fame and fortune they wanted. Xe wanted them to live a decent life. Xe just didn't want to be dragged along with them.

But they were relying on xem. Zach especially. He had such adamant faith that Cory was the key to them getting noticed. Cory wanted to pull out because it wasn't fair for xem to get chained down as the price for them getting free, but xir guilt wouldn't let xem. Xe could say all xe wanted that this whole fucking planet and every goddamn person in it was meaningless, but that wasn't an excuse to inflict suffering. Xe didn't want to be like xir cousins, or the shithead bullies at school, or xir mom. Xe didn't want to not care about other people's feelings. They may be meaningless in the grand scheme of the universe, but that didn't make Cory feel entitled to trample over them. Xe only ever wanted to hurt the people who absolutely deserved it.

Carolyn nodded.

“I completely understand,” she said sagely. “That's why I prefer having my own business. I don't have to worry about any bosses or co-workers getting in my way. I do things exactly the way I want, and it always turns out better than when you get all these other people giving you their opinion.”

Cory wasn't sure she *completely* understood, but he didn't feel like saying so.

"Yeah," he agreed vaguely.

"So if you're not interested in getting famous in a band, what else do you have in mind?"

*Getting the fuck out of here*, he thought. All the way out. Right out of the whole fucking universe where he could finally get some peace.

"I don't know. Nothing really. I haven't thought about it much."

"Then maybe business is the best option. It sets you up to do well early on, but on top of that the road's wide open for you especially. Your father would give you an easy ride straight to the top."

Cory waggled his fork between his fingers.

That was another thing. He wasn't opposed to the offer because he wanted to *earn* his success as opposed to having it *handed* to him. It was because he hated the fundamental system. This whole system full of dichotomies like success and failure, easy roads and difficult roads, rich and poor, lucky and unlucky, was just irredeemably disgusting. Cory had the world available to him by sheer luck of circumstances, what the fuck kind of way was that to run things? Pitting people against each other, competing just for the scraps to survive while a lucky few were born into luxury? What the fuck? It made no goddamn sense, and frankly Cory couldn't believe the masses hadn't risen up in protest by now, burning the rich and their homes and their businesses all down to the ground.

What the fuck were they waiting for, permission?

Carolyn was thinking inside the system, offering Cory a chance for an easy, comfortable life versus a life of struggle and uncertainty. But Cory was thinking outside of that. No one should have to earn their right to live. Easy roads and hard roads shouldn't exist at all because there shouldn't be that much of a disparity. The injustice of it all was so overwhelming Cory felt

the entirety of xir nebula start to burn, but xe didn't know what to do about it. Xe wanted to set the whole world on fire if that was what it took to get rid of this toxic atmosphere for good. That was the easy solution. The appealing solution. The powerful had had things too easy for them for so long, it seemed only fair for the ones who wanted change to finally have an easy route too.

"I guess it makes sense if I can't think of anything else," xe conceded for the sake of the conversation. Because there was no way xe could get into any of xir true thoughts. Not with *her*.

"Or maybe you want to try interior design," she suggested, with just the right amount of lightheartedness in her smile that she could be either completely serious or making a joke, depending on how xe reacted. "Work with *me* instead."

Cory snorted.

"Right. Because I'm so good with colors."

"You might be. Just because you make everything black doesn't mean you don't have a hidden talent in there."

"I guess I'll think about it."

"Maybe we'll find out today while we're out shopping."

Carolyn had taken xem out on these kinds of trips before, where they store-hopped for the materials her current design projects called for. So far, xe hadn't shown any hints of hidden talents, but xe had to be accommodating.

"Who knows, right?"

Carolyn smiled, and they finished the rest of their breakfast with the same one-sided enthusiasm. The restaurant had a soft hush as the rest of the customers continued their conversations as well, and Ae was spread all throughout, curiously tasting the auras of each person, licking at their insides with eir many nebula tongues, while keeping eir core locked with Cory's.

While Cory preferred having people at a distance, Ae still couldn't stop being curious about humans. No matter how much Ae learned about them—about each individual's inner workings and the larger functioning of society in which they fit—e still found it fascinating. Humans seemed to be the most complex thing Ae had encountered in all the Infinite. Everything else operated on natural patterns, moving in clear rhythms guided by energy and neatly interlocked forces.

But *humans*. They went beyond that. They created things out of seemingly nothing. They didn't follow just natural physics, they also followed purely imaginary forces, thoughts and feelings they had regarding what they believed other people thought. They responded to a force that didn't exist outside their own internal creation, but which they attributed to something external, a so-called "social pressure". This pressure had no essence in itself, it was simply a belief that an individual's action would lead to consequences if it went against what others expected. And the fact that there would be expectations against which anyone would measure or be measured was to Ae so . . . interesting.

Because it was something Ae couldn't fully understand. Ae could see the detrimental effects it had on the humans' selves, but they lived within that pressure anyway. Ae was glad to be an outsider, able to observe without succumbing to its influence. There were other things as well that made the whole place one Ae would not want to be bound to as a permanent resident, it was only fun because e knew e had the freedom to leave whenever e wished. So Ae could understand why Cory felt caught in a torture chamber.

"Did you get enough?" Carolyn asked.

Cory set the silverware on xir empty plate, sticky with thin spreads of syrup.

"Yeah."

"Are you sure? You're probably still growing, you know. I'd hate for my boy to starve."

Ae exerted a counter force to the violent surge in Cory's chest, calming the red out of xir vision and the revving wheels in xir skull. When the room was back in focus, Cory took in a slow, deep breath.

There was no reason for her to know how xe felt about that. She was still locked in the boy/girl way of thinking, and the odds were incredibly low that she would come to question it on her own. If xe didn't tell her xir thoughts, of course she would still think of xem as her "boy" or "son".

Of course, she most likely would still think that way even if xe did explain xir way of thinking—because it was just too weird, right? How could someone say they weren't a boy or a girl? Of course a person had to be one or the other. That was just *biology*.

Except it wasn't.

If it was just biology, there wouldn't be all these expectations on people that had absolutely nothing to do with biology. No matter what anyone said, "boy" and "girl" were never just about what kind of body a person had, they were also so much more, a whole package of norms and judgments. They were *genders*, delusions embedded in the fundamental fabric of society. And Cory wanted nothing to do with it—like with so many other things. But because people took the "truth" and "reality" of gender for granted, they would think *xe* was the delusional one for questioning something so obvious. Carolyn would be no different. At the most, she might tolerate xir view like a parent might tolerate their toddler's nonsensical babbling, but she wouldn't actually believe any of it. And Cory would rather feel angry at her ignorance than at her inability to accept xem wholeheartedly.

Xe got enough of that from being around Zach.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"All right. Let's get going then."

The rest of the morning went about the way Cory expected. Carolyn had her usual venues to visit, putting her hands on fabrics to see the patterns up close and feel the textures and put the samples right next to each other to check their compatibility. She browsed the newest catalogs, compared prices and availability, spoke to the managers she had built close networks with. It was always disorienting seeing the way she was in her professional mode. With clients, she was a pure delight, giving off a warm air, telling jokes and making friendly small-talk, listening to their needs attentively and offering suggestions that were helpful, not domineering. When she spoke with her providers, she was professional, knowledgeable, charming, and firm about her expectations. People respected her and wanted to work with her.

Which told Cory one thing.

She knew that the way she was at home was unacceptable. She knew that if she blew up in the face of clients or partners she would lose her business. She *knew* that behavior was no way to maintain good relationships. She knew it, yet she didn't perform or filter herself at home. So obviously, family wasn't worth as much to her as her work.

That on its own wouldn't have bothered Cory. Xe didn't believe that family was, by natural law, inherently more important than anything else, which was why xe didn't feel guilty for valuing plenty of other things more than xir family.

What bothered xem was the *abuse*. She could prioritize her work all she wanted, but that didn't give her the right to be cruel.

And she certainly had no right to forget her cruelty or expect *xem* to forget it whenever it suited her, as if it didn't matter. Cory acted as if it didn't, but xe was torn. On the one hand, xe didn't want her to have so much power over xem. But on the other hand, she *did*. She was the only one. Somehow, she had drilled a private access tunnel into xir heart and had been using it

from the very beginning to hurt xem. Everyone else could annoy xem or trigger xir anger, but she was the one who could cause xem *pain*.

Cory wished xe didn't care. So many times xe had tried to convince xemself to not care. It never worked. Not really. Maybe for a brief moment xe could feel the logic of why xe shouldn't care that she hated xem, but it always faded. And while xe didn't want her to know how much she hurt xem, didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing, it still caused a volcano to rumble in xir chest when she seemed genuinely oblivious to her history, or to genuinely think that xe could just easily set the past aside when it was convenient for her, to turn off the effect it exerted on xem for as long as she wanted them to play at being a happy family.

Yeah, her hatred and resentment and anger hurt. Her screaming hurt. But it was direct.

This? This hurt because it was fake. When she screamed out her anger, she didn't care what xe might have to say in return. When she was happy, she wanted xem to play along. Whatever questions she asked, she still didn't care what xe was feeling. Not really. Everything was about her. She expected everything xe did to accommodate *her*.

And that hurt.

The space behind her alluring mask was always an iron maiden. Cory wasn't tricked by the mask, not anymore, but xe still ended up among the spikes. The only thing that changed was how much better he could endure it.

Which xe did, because for whatever reason beyond xir conscious control, despite everything, deep down, xe wanted xir mother to want xem. Xe wanted her to see xem and love xem for who xe really was. An impossibility, xe knew. A ridiculous thing to torture xemself with, but xe couldn't make it stop. Xe wanted xir mother to be happy like this for real, not pretending that everything was ok just because she was in the mood for it.

God, xe wanted it so much. So embarrassingly much.

*Fuck.*

As xe hung back from the spotlight, xe withdrew into the comfort of Ae's music, but even then, it was hard watching Carolyn perform and the audience believe. Every smile and laugh made the coals in Cory's chest smolder hotter and hotter. Listening to her pleasant tone, seeing her cheerful smile, xe wanted to scream. Xe wanted to scream so fucking hard at every goddamn person in every goddamn store and tell them, tell them she was *lying*. Xe wanted them to *know*. Xe wanted Ae to share all xir memories of being screamed at, of xir possessions being thrown to crash into the wall or ground. She didn't deserve to have this other life when she had always been determined to wreck xirs. Xe didn't want to let her get away with being happy.

And xe knew Ae would do it. If xe willed it, Ae would respond.

But xe couldn't bring xemself to will it. Xe wanted it, wanted her utter ruin and downfall. Part of xem did. But . . . but . . .

It was past noon when they came out of the fifth furniture store. Carolyn had something very specific in mind that she was looking for, and she wasn't finding it anywhere.

"I'm not ready to settle yet," she said as they got in the car. "I'm only going to wait until I've completely exhausted all my other options before I give up."

Cory was tired. Even with Ae humming a balm against xir heart, pretending to not be in a constant buzz of frazzled knots and angry scribbles ripping through pages in a notebook was draining.

But xe pushed xemself to say, "You're too good at what you do to give up."

Carolyn's good mood meant she wasn't bothered by Cory's dull tone.

"Damn right I am," she agreed with a smile. "So, you ready for some lunch? You're looking kind of worn out."

Cory shrugged.

“Sure.”

“What would you like?”

Cory couldn't have cared less. Even in better circumstances, he didn't take a particular interest in food.

“I'm fine with anything. You can pick.”

“All right. I think I could go for some Italian. How's that sound?”

“Works for me.”

“Great. La Piazza isn't too far.”

Of course. Another expensive, fine dining restaurant. Cory resisted the urge to grimace. Carolyn just couldn't handle the aesthetic of anything average or lower price. It offended her sensibilities. And that was why he could be sure she would never show up to any of his shows. Mike took pride in keeping his establishment clean, but it was by no means up to Carolyn's standards.

“Ok.”

The place was pretty busy by the time they arrived, but that wasn't surprising for a Friday afternoon. The space inside was warm with dim lantern light while heavy curtains allowed only a hint of sun through the windows. Tables were set at distances that allowed for a sense of privacy, and tall, leafy plants added splashes of contrast to the otherwise white and red scheme. Soft, traditional violins provided a background to the hum of conversation, and their refinement was matched by the waiters, who all wore the same matching black iron-pressed slacks, long sleeve button down, and waist apron, and who moved with careful poise among the patrons.

With it just being the two of them, they were seated quickly, next to a small stone fountain with a lion's head, and handed their linen menus.

“What are you getting?” Carolyn asked after a minute of browsing the cursive script.

Cory sighed.

“Not sure yet. You?”

“Hmm. I can’t decide if I’m in the mood for soup or . . .” She scanned the page with pursed lips. “. . . eggplant parmesan.”

“Hm.”

Cory kept xir eyes on the page.

“I guess I could get soup almost anywhere, but not a good eggplant . . .”

Cory got the feeling she was trying to get xem to engage. So xe complied.

“You could always get soup now and take the eggplant home for dinner.”

“True. But it wouldn’t be as good.”

Cory closed xir eyes. Fuck, what did she want? Xem to make a decision for her? Ae fed xem what xe really needed, amplifying their combined music so Cory could feel the medicinal rhythms as heavily as from speakers on a stage.

“Then I’d go with the eggplant,” xe said stiffly.

“Yeah, that makes sense. I’ll do that.” She closed the menu and set it down. “You?”

“Still looking.”

The ambient was abuzz as people all around had their conversations, hushed with decorum to fit the restaurant’s class, and Ae was again curiously poking around to taste all the new flavors. Through their bond, Cory felt the two middle-aged friends complaining about their husbands and kids, the table of businessmen discussing a new deal they were developing at work, an older couple just out for a nice time, a party of seven thirty-somethings celebrating a birthday. So many people, each one with a unique musical signature, the representative flavor of all their hopes, dreams, morals, values, desires, thoughts, feelings—the essence and complete whole of their being.

None of them tasted any better than elevator music, at least not to either Ae or Cory.

“Pasta primavera,” Cory finally announced while folding xir menu down.

“Anything else?”

“No.”

“You sure? We could get an appetizer.”

In xir nebula, Cory let loose a scathing scream.

“I don’t need one. But if you want something, I’ll split it with you.”

“Oh, I think I’d be fine with just a salad. Do you want one?”

The scream was still going. It helped keep Cory’s body from bearing the full pressure of xir irritation.

“Sure.”

“All right.” With that decided, she took Cory’s menu and neatly stacked it with her own in preparation for the waiter. “Now, next thing”

Cory took a deep breath while Carolyn leaned forward on her folded arms.

“You remember our family dinner is next week, yes?”

Family dinner. That monthly gathering from hell when Cory and xir parents got together with xir uncle, aunt, and cousins, switching off hosting duties each time. As far as Cory could tell, none of them really knew why the fuck they did it.

“Kind of hard to forget. It’s our turn to have them over.”

“That’s right. So I just want to make sure you don’t have any other plans.”

“When have I ever made other plans?”

Carolyn smiled.

“Never. Because you’re a good kid. You wouldn’t leave me alone to deal with that *bitch* and her god-awful sons, would you?”

Only because she would never let xem get away with it.

“No.”

Cory felt a tingle in Ae’s nebula that xe knew was the equivalent of a devilish grin. And xe interpreted the idea that hummed between them as the memory of Bryce’s sweaty, horror-flushed face reappeared in xir sight. Xir nebula tingled with the same perverse delight.

“And actually,” xe said slowly, putting xir own arms on the table in the same fold. Carolyn’s eyes flickered with interest. “How would you feel about me bringing someone?”

Carolyn raised an intrigued eyebrow.

“You know someone else to bring?”

“Yeah, I do actually.”

“Someone in the band?”

“No.”

“So, you know someone who’s not in your band that you would actually want to meet your extended family.”

This fascinated Carolyn immensely. Xe could feel it in the quickening of her vibration. Xir reception was open enough for that much.

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Well,” Carolyn said with uncommitted hesitation, “*technically* it’s a *family* dinner.”

“Yeah but *technically* we hate doing it,” xe pointed out, “so why treat it like some sacred ritual? It would make our team bigger, which would be nice.”

“Well, you make a good case,” Carolyn said with a smirk, “but you’ve got me curious. I thought you said you didn’t have a girlfriend?”

“I don’t.”

“Then who is it you’re bringing?”

“Someone important. To me.”

“Important,” Carolyn repeated.

“Yes.”

“What exactly do you mean by ‘important?’”

“I mean like, they’re just . . .”

Cory gestured vaguely, wondering how deep he was really going to get with this, right here, right now, without any plan or preparation. But when he tried to think of how to put it into words, he realized he couldn’t *not* get deep.

“They’re that one person in the world who really gets me, you know?” he said slowly, keeping his voice between the two of them. “Being around them doesn’t feel like work. It actually makes me feel better. Even better than being alone feels. They just have this vibe to them. We’re together and I can just . . . relax. I don’t know how else to put it except that there’s this kind of . . . compatibility. We have the same kind of energy, like we’re on the same frequency. It’s like when you overlap two songs that were already great on their own and then you get an even more amazing song out of it because they just work so perfectly together.”

Carolyn was staring at him intently as she tried to process his words.

“So,” she began slowly, “you have that deep sense of compatibility . . . but you’re not dating.”

Cory restrained the urge to toss up his hands.

“Why do I have to be *dating* someone just because we’re compatible?” It was hard restraining the testiness in his voice. “Is that the only kind of compatibility there is?”

“Well then what would you call it? What do you *do* together?”

Cory didn’t know where to start explaining that. Fortunately he had no intention to. Not in full detail.

“We don’t really *do* anything. We listen to music mostly. They come to the shows and listen to us practice. We hang out and just . . . I don’t know, think about all the things we don’t understand about the world and people. Think about how things should be. Go places where we can just be alone and escape all of *this*.” Xe gestured vaguely with xir hands.

Carolyn looked like she was examining a particularly difficult work of abstract art.

“So, music and talking?”

Cory exhaled slowly.

“I guess that’s the basic gist of it.”

“Do you think it’ll ever turn into something more?”

Cory squinted xir eyes.

“More how?”

“I mean, do you think you’ll ever want to start dating? Or having sex?”

Cory breathed in deeply and focused on the sensation of Ae exerting a calm on the violent seismograph scratches in xir quaking chest.

“Mom, we’re already as close as we could possibly be,” xe said with a heavy voice.

“There isn’t anything more we could become. This is it. This is the highest, deepest, greatest state we could ever be at. Like, I really don’t know how to explain it. We understand each other better than anyone else. We want to be with each other more than anyone else. We feel something with each other that we don’t feel with anyone else. I don’t know what the word for it is, but just because it’s not romantic or sexual doesn’t mean it isn’t the most profound relationship either of us could ever have with a person.”

Carolyn looked at xem with her hand against her lips in contemplation

“So . . . what does that make you?”

Cory shrugged.

“I don’t know. Maybe there’s not a word for it. ‘Friend’ doesn’t seem good enough because people don’t take friends seriously. But we’re not *dating*, so, I don’t know.”

“Is this person a boy or a girl?”

Cory scratched the white tablecloth hard as xe pulled xir hand into a fist.

“They’re not either.”

Carolyn’s brow furrowed.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean . . . they’re not a boy or a girl.”

Carolyn tilted her head.

“How can a person not be either a boy or a girl?”

There it was. Cory had totally called it.

“They’re just not. No one *has* to be a boy or a girl if they don’t want to be.”

She made a confused face.

“But, it’s not a choice. You’re *born* either one or the other.”

“No,” Cory countered sharply, as quickly as a reflex. Then before xe could stop xemself with rational thought, the venting in xir nebula found a leak into xir mouth. “You’re born a *person*, and then everyone else decides *for* you what you are. They look at your body and make all these decisions about what you’re like, what your life is going to be like, all before you even get a chance to figure out who you are. But what the fuck does your body have to do with what you want out of life? What kind of personality you have? What kind of music you like? What you’re good at or what you’re capable of? What the fuck does it have to do with anything?”

Xe wasn’t really asking. Xe made choppy gestures with xir hands as xe gave the answer.

“It doesn’t mean jack *shit*, but we’ve literally built our entire fucking society around this idea that ‘boys’ are one thing and ‘girls’ are another and it makes no fucking *sense* because it’s

not fucking *true*! If ‘boys’ are one way and ‘girls’ are another it’s because they’re told they’re *supposed* to be that way their entire fucking lives from the moment they’re born. But you just have to use your fucking *brain* and you can see that the ‘rules’ are *bullshit*. Guys can do ‘girly’ things and girls can do ‘manly’ things,” xe said with exaggerated disdain in the words xe marked with finger quotes.

“And you can just look around the world and see that the rules are different in different places and change over time. It’s all made up. It’s not *real*. And I don’t have to believe in it if I don’t want to just because the whole goddamn world is brainwashed!”

Carolyn was staring. The people sitting at the nearest tables had turned their heads curiously when Cory’s voice had been pushed louder by speed and vehemence. For a moment xe breathed hotly and combed through xir hair with xir fingers.

When Carolyn finally figured out something to say, she asked with a low voice, “How long have you been thinking like that?”

Cory blew out a breath.

“I don’t know. I think I’ve always kind of felt it, but I didn’t really come up with the words until a few months ago.”

“What made you find the words?”

Cory looked her in the eye.

“I met Ae.”

“Ae? Like, the letter ‘A’?”

“I mean, it’s pronounced the same way, but it’s spelled A-E.”

“And . . . is that the person you were talking about?”

“Yeah. We met in October. And so many things became clear to me after that. Like, I can’t put it into words. I just had the most profound epiphany, and all these things I had been

struggling with my whole life, it was like, I could finally see the bigger picture and I could understand things in a way I hadn't been able to before. And this was one of those things."

Carolyn still had her brows furrowed and licked her lips.

"Ok. But . . . if someone isn't a boy or a girl, then what are they? Like, what do you call them?"

"They're just a person. Why is that so hard?"

Carolyn shook her head.

"But how do you *talk* about them? What do you say instead of 'he' or 'she'?"

"You've been hearing me say 'they' and 'them' this whole time. And you literally just used 'them' to ask that question. You didn't have a problem using 'they' or 'them' to talk about someone before you knew anything about them. Why would it be so hard to just keep using 'they' now?"

Carolyn squinted her eyes.

"That's . . . weird."

"Yeah, well, you know what else is weird? Being called something that you're not. I mean, how would *you* feel if people started calling you 'mister' or 'sir' or used 'he' to talk about you? You'd feel pretty fucking weird, right? Well that's exactly how it feels to me, and it's weird when anyone tries to pin Ae down one way or the other. So maybe we should try changing the stupid language so that no one has to feel weird, don't you think? Then no one would feel weird using 'they' and no one would have to feel weird being called 'he' or 'she' when they're not either."

Carolyn sighed like she was trying to be patiently compassionate.

"Honey, I think maybe you're taking this a little too seriously."

She reached across the table to take xir hand, but Cory hissed and shook xir head.

“No, I’m taking this seriously just the right amount. This is all so fucking *stupid*, don’t you see? This whole ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ bullshit has fucked everyone up! People can’t be *people*, they can’t just be whoever the fuck they want to be, they have to follow these goddamn fucked-up rules that tell you what a fucking ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ can and should be. Don’t you see it? It’s the whole rest of the fucking world that takes this bullshit too seriously because no one wants to let it go even though there’s no good fucking reason for any of it!”

“Sir? Sir!”

A waiter had swiftly arrived at their table, and Cory rounded in xir chair to bare xir teeth.

“I’m not a fucking *sir*! Jesus *Christ*!”

The waiter looked bewildered but persisted with as much professional calm as possible.

“I’m sorry. Could you *please* keep your voice down? If you keep causing a disturbance, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“You think I care?”

“We’ll be quiet,” Carolyn said reassuringly, squeezing Cory’s hand while giving the waiter a direct look. “I promise.”

The waiter took a slow breath, then, when Cory didn’t say anything else, nodded gratefully and walked away.

“Cory, I like it here. I don’t want to end up on a ban list or something. So let’s drop it for now.”

Cory pulled xir hand out of Carolyn’s and slumped with xir back against the chair.

“Fine with me.”

They could never bring it up again as far as Cory was concerned. And that would probably be the best option.

“But,” she added, “I’m *incredibly* curious about this Ae person, so if you still want to bring *them* to dinner, please do.”

“You sure?” Cory asked skeptically.

“Since you never mentioned them before just now, it feels like you probably weren’t planning on telling me any time soon. So I’d like to take advantage of the opportunity.”

Well, she wasn’t wrong. Cory hadn’t been planning on introducing Ae to xir parents officially at any point because . . . why would xe? But Ae was definitely going to be there, one way or another, and if e appeared to the others in a visible form, it could make things a lot more interesting. The biggest question was, what would Carolyn’s mood be like *then*? No way to know.

“All right, I’ll bring them.”

“Fantastic. Now,” she said, craning her head to look around the room. “Why the fuck hasn’t anyone come by to get our order yet?”

\*

Vio didn’t look for Cory at lunch.

Ae had made a quick appearance to him before school started to inform him through that nebulous hum that Cory was going to be occupied all day—against xir will. So Vio went straight to the art room where he could hang out by himself on the couch and pulled out his sketchbook.

He flipped through pages of grotesque images, photorealistic sketches of entities with skin melting away as if scalded by acid, skeletal structures of no known existing species, organs spilling out of gaping holes, enormous mouths gleefully consuming other parts of its own body, close-ups of eyes infected with pestilence and oozing pus, too-long fingers tearing open flesh and digging into sores, nightmarish grins filled with excessive needle-teeth. Creatures Vio could

picture as vividly in his mind as if he had been studying them in person, touching their skin and seeing the light play off their fangs and exposed innards.

He picked up where he had left off on his latest creation, a vaguely humanoid tree whose bark contained a digestive system hungry for blood and bone. It was coming along nicely, the base elements mostly completed. Next came the details that would bring the textures to life.

As usual, Vio lost himself in the work. Or perhaps more rightly to say, he lost everything else but the work. Everything beyond the page faded away. There was no world but the one connected by his mind and pencil. No world except the one that made sense.

*wshwshwshwshwsh*

The pencil whispered, moving back and forth, darkening the roots with more detail, including the blood they drank up from the drenched soil.

Vio liked designing unique beings like this, beings free of human expectations. He shared with Cory the idea that gender was unnecessary. More than just that, it was damaging. Confining. It blocked the flow of people's potential so much that they killed and amputated parts of themselves to fit the image of who they were supposed to be. To Vio, that was the true horror: this world that mutilated people's souls. *This* world was what scared him, not the creatures he drew that disturbed the "normal" people who saw them.

*wshwshwshwshwsh*

The darkest parts were the trails of blood rising up through the creature's arteries and dripping down on the surface. Vio shaded the rest of the bark to look weathered and old, like dry scales ready to slough off.

But being gendered didn't bother him as much as it bothered Cory. He knew how much Cory chafed against "he" and "him" and "boy", and he understood it. Vio just didn't have the raw nerves that Cory had, so he wasn't in a constant state of irritation that could be triggered into

a flare with the right touch. Like Cory, Vio wanted to strip away all the ridiculousness of human life completely, and gender was one aspect through which people tried to pressure him to fit the mold of “normal human”.

But even if he somehow were to find himself not being gendered anymore, it wouldn't be enough. He wanted this shell of a body to fall away and reveal his true self. He wanted to be freed to become the eldritch being he felt he was, so inhuman, so incomprehensible that no one could possibly mistake him for a “he” or a “she”. Vio was perfectly fine with the idea of being an “it”.

*wshwshwshwshwsh*

The tree's face bumped out on a knot framed by a thick, smooth ring, and out of its mouth hung a rope of dripping large intestines.

But he appreciated Cory's feeling in the matter too. Vio wanted to be known for who he really was even if no one could actually see it. It would be easy for people to call Vio an “it” if he *looked* like a monster, but it shouldn't be that way. He shouldn't have to achieve the impossible for people to let go of their useless assumptions. No one should.

But identities—social identities anyway—depended on what *other* people decided, and what other people decided came from pre-packaged options. There was very little tolerance for anything that lay outside those options, so as long as he and Cory were stuck in these human containers, there was no escaping the labels assigned to them from the outside.

*wshwshwshwshwsh*

Vio made sure to add a glossy sheen to anything wet, keeping white circles on the parts of the bulbous intestines that caught a little bit of light.

Vio admired Cory. Even though it was futile, he fought against it. He couldn't help himself sometimes, when the anger got to be too much to hold in. He had crossed out the

identity that had been pushed on xem without xir permission, rejected it with aggressive force, scratching hard X's into xir labels so thoroughly xe didn't feel their presence anymore. And xe snarled when anyone tried to undo xir wok by reasserting those labels.

Vio was familiar with crossing pieces out. Victor, devious, oblivion, violate, void. Just erase a few letters here and there and what remained was a name that felt close to being right. Comfortable at least, if he was going to have a name constructed out of a human language.

*wshwshwshwshwsh*

The leaves needed more texture too. With graphite alone, he played light and dark against each other, capturing them as well a black and white photo.

In contrast, Ae had never had any labels to cross out. Ae had arrived without a history to overwrite and deliberately presented in a way that defied easy categorization, leaving confusion and disturbance in eir wake. People were compelled to stare when they saw em, and when they couldn't decide what they thought e was, they were left flailing uncomfortably. Because for some reason neither Vio nor Cory could understand, not knowing if a person was a boy or a girl made it impossible for them to function. Their brains short-circuited without that fundamental piece of information. It was funny to watch, actually, and Vio knew Ae enjoyed it, which was why e consistently chose such an ambiguous form to materialize with.

Unlike Ae, however, Vio didn't even want to pass as human. Vio wished he could be like Ae, able to transform into any appearance he wanted. Because he felt the same way e did: that no matter what anyone thought of him, no matter what anyone decided about him, they would be wrong. The people who acted like he wasn't human didn't really *believe* it, they just wanted to punish him for being weird.

But they were wrong.

He *wasn't* human, he felt it. So no matter what people thought of him—he, she, they, whatever—it would always feel wrong. It would always *be* wrong.

*wshwshwshwshwsh*

Next were the loose limbs gripped in many of the hands at the end of all the branches, the inky blood dripping from their severed ends down to the ground beneath. Leftovers saved for later.

He had felt that for a long time, and nothing had been able to change that. Everyone treated him with mockery to shame him into fitting in better—or at all. Including his mother, though her approach was guilt, pressuring him to at least pretend to be normal for *her* sake.

But he just couldn't learn it all, the things that people seemed to do so naturally. And he had decided he didn't want to. So let her guilt him. Let people call him a freak. He didn't want to be normal anyway. He didn't want to learn how to be human. And he hadn't felt guilt or shame in a while now.

Not since he had met Ae.

Vio remembered the night vividly. He didn't know if that was because of yet another glitch in his brain wiring or because it had been so profound an experience that his memory simply latched on to every detail.

No reason it couldn't be both.

In any case, the memory replayed for him, complete and clear, any time he chose to revisit it, stepping fully into it like a room.

Thursday, October 12. Students under twenty-one were allowed inside Mike's bar that night, but Zoe still let him and Aki in through the back, because it felt special that way. Aki was small, so Zoe liked to greet her by picking her up all the way off the ground to kiss her. Vio closed the door while Aki wrapped her arms and legs around Zoe's neck and waist, and for a

moment they just kept kissing with Aki's back pinned to the wall. Vio didn't really understand that kind of thing, but if it made his friends happy, then he was happy for them.

When they were done, Zoe dropped them off at their usual two-seat table close to the bar so she and Aki could pass flirtatious smiles to each other throughout night, in the spurts between their work. Aki had a massive anatomy textbook open to a page detailing the components of human lungs, and Vio had his sketchbook set flat on the table. He sat hunched over it with his graphite pencil sweeping and stitching lines into place to get *just* the right shape, carefully tracing the image in his mind onto the paper.

Normally such a crowd, such bustling, and such intensity of noise would have been not only distracting but debilitating. So many times he had rolled himself up and pressed as hard as he could on his ears, overwhelmed and agonized by noises that didn't seem to bother anyone else. Were they all deaf, he would wonder. But no, it just turned out he was *too sensitive*. He was a freak.

Coming to the bar was different though. Somehow. He had been worried the first time Aki had brought him there because he had been certain he would have a meltdown just walking through the door. He still couldn't understand why he didn't. Perhaps it was a gift from God. A safe place besides just the local university's library where he liked to spend most of his time after school. Anywhere felt better than home, so he was grateful to Aki for the excuse to stay away so late.

He told his mom he was studying, which was another reason why Zoe let him in through the back. If he got the same large black X drawn in sharpie on his left hand as the others, his mom would have questions, and that was a situation Zoe and Aki were more than willing to help him avoid.

He was working on his drawing with the sketchbook turned upside down to make it more comfortable to work with. And he was absorbed. Not only did he not have meltdowns here, but he was able to fine-tune his focus so much that he stopped hearing anything. Literally. In that mode, his brain just stopped processing sound entirely. Hypnotized by his work, everything else faded away so that all he was aware of was the image in his head and the replica forming on the page.

Time passed. Not that he was aware of it, only the progress he made mattered. He had started with a blank page when he and Aki arrived, and now his gruesomely twisted figure was completely lined and receiving its shades. One of the arms was already lifting off the page, casting its convincing shadows.

And then something entered his space.

Usually, Aki had to reach across the table and put her hand on his sketchbook (careful to not touch *him* since that would be . . . unpleasantly jarring) to get his attention. But this time, it was *sound* that crossed the chasm between his headspace and the outside. That *never* happened. Someone could call his name right at his ear and he wouldn't notice as long as he was still immersed in himself.

Yet here it was.

It didn't strike him suddenly. It was more like . . . a tide was rising, and after a moment, he gradually realized that the waters had reached his feet. The sound had been going through his ears unprocessed, but then something inside, something instinctual, realized *this* was worth dialing into the right frequency to hear.

And so he heard it.

And he stopped drawing.

He went still and the page blurred as his focus shifted from his eyes to his ears.

Guitar.

One guitar was playing, amplified by the speakers on stage, its strings plucking sadness into the air, raindrops pattering in a repeat pattern, forming a melody of gray concrete and clouds hazy beyond a foggy window, chest heavy and hollow. Vio sank into the feeling, not knowing if it felt good or bad, but not wanting to leave either way. And then a voice emerged, singing of aching loneliness with a jaded calm.

Vio felt something respond in his chest. Something deeper inside than his heart. Something beyond that. Something that shivered in a place he couldn't touch but that spread out to touch him.

Then came the chorus. The chord changed, still sad but with a new assertive force. The voice grew an energy, the soft flow becoming rougher and louder.

The guitar took over for a bridge. Then the sad melody returned for the second verse, followed again by the assertive chorus. And then instead of going back, the singer pushed forward, voice like gravel and bruises and fists clenched tight. Not quite a scream, the song was too soft for that, but the feeling was there, the voice's timbre hinting at even greater frustration and pain and sorrow lying in wait for their turn to come out.

But not yet. For now, the voice switched once more to lullaby calm as the guitar carried the song to its close, lonely notes seeking lonely hearts and plucking their strings too.

Vio felt his chest throb. The song might as well have reached out with hands and shaken him, reached inside and squeezed his heart and lungs.

And then he felt something else.

A new song that wasn't from the speakers but one he felt inside, playing throughout his whole body, in his bones and muscles and organs. It was beautiful, and it *felt* . . . Well, it felt like

what he thought church was supposed to feel like. It felt like how people looked when they closed their eyes and raised their hands in worship, moved almost to tears by joy.

Vio listened to the rest of the performer's music in that state, blind and ecstatic, body dissolving into melodies and harmonies. When it was over, his vision refocused, and he found his drawing blemished by tears. He wiped his face and his hands came away wet.

"Vio?" Aki asked across the table. "What's wrong?"

Vio looked up. Aki was looking at him with concern. She wanted to reach out, but she knew better than to touch him. He liked that about her. But what did she mean *wrong*? Vio looked down at himself, and . . . oh. He was surprised to see that his body was still whole. He had expected his flesh to be gone, no longer solid matter but pure sound waves. How disappointing.

"I'm still here," he said.

Aki furrowed her eyebrows.

"Where else would you be?"

Vio looked around. People were still applauding, but the performer had left the stage. In the interval, no music was playing, but Vio could still feel something, a hum in his stomach. It was hard to process everything in the room. So much was happening it all kind of blended together. But soon something came into focus. Coming toward him were two people. One was a student he recognized from school, but he didn't know the other person—and they seemed hard to forget. They were indecipherably androgynous with black—*black*—skin and pure white hair that resembled the famous Kurt Cobain style, if it had been thick and clean. The student didn't have an inviting expression, but the other, Vio could see their eyes were directly on him with keen interest.

But more than that, Vio could *feel* them.

In the seconds it took for the two to cross the distance separating them, Vio heard multiple albums worth of music received directly into his body like radio signals. And within those signals, Vio learned who the person was. *What* Ae was.

Wonder filled him, large as an ocean.

They arrived, Ae and Cory, and Vio couldn't speak.

That happened sometimes. His mother hated it, but he couldn't help it. Sometimes his brain misfired and he just couldn't form words.

But it was ok this time, because Ae didn't need words. E could reach inside him with a piece of emself, eir *true* self, and know exactly what he felt.

Aki sat on the other side of the table, watching as Ae and Vio stared at each other, Vio in unblinking awe and Ae with a fascinated smile. No one said anything, and yet they seemed to be having some kind of exchange that she couldn't understand. She was too confused to interrupt, so she just sat there waiting.

Vio could feel it. He could *feel* her and her confusion.

Vio didn't know how to explain anything to her, but he wanted her to understand. She was his friend. He wanted her to understand.

Ae understood that Vio wanted her to understand.

So Ae reached out a tongue of eir nebula and sunk it into the pool of Aki's own, which at that point was like any other human's, still contained mostly within her body except for a thin aura.

Through Ae, Vio felt all the connections. It was impossible to not feel Cory because the two of them were so intimately woven, but now he also felt Aki. He had always felt comfortable with her. He had liked the way her presence felt ever since they met. And now, for the first time, he could *hear* what her presence sounded like. He liked it.

And Aki too learned what Ae was as e shared a glimpse of emself with her. And the four of them hummed together in a quartet of souls, learning each other's most fundamental melodies, their sincerest thoughts and emotions played on full volume.

And because you couldn't listen to Aki without finding Zoe integrated into the foundations, Ae turned eir attention to the bartender and extended another tongue, dipping down into the depths of that nebula as well. Making a symphony of five. Not quite a harmony, but not a cacophony either. There was synergy there, they all felt it. Even Cory, who actively avoided direct human contact, had to admit that xe felt some compatibility.

But it was also too much all at once, so after their brief introduction, Ae pulled out, breaking their connection and leaving Vio, Aki, and Zoe gasping. Not that it was air they needed, but it was the only thing their bodies knew how to process in such a state of shock.

Zoe looked over from the counter while Aki and Vio looked up from the table, and suddenly they could see a shimmery substance filling the air of the bar, iridescently shifting its colors while rolling around like a cloud morphing with the wind. They knew what it was, but it was still a marvel to see.

Vio looked up at it with a grin. Aki and Zoe kept glancing back and forth from it to each other. Ae's nebula pulsed as if somewhere inside was a heart made of lightning while eir human form held its smile. It was Cory who moved first, since xe had already gone through the wonder before. Xe stepped closer to the table and examined the drawing on Vio's open page.

Vio was used to seeing people grimace with disgust upon seeing his drawings, but Cory kept a neutral face until xe nodded and looked Vio in the eye.

“Cool.”

Vio's heart fluttered. He was so overwhelmed he didn't know what to do with all the information he had just received. But he was excited. So utterly excited he began to bounce in

his chair and a gleeful sound squeezed out of his tight throat as he raised his hands to fan rapidly in the air.

Having friends was one of the best feelings in the world, especially when one of them was a being from beyond the known universe. And ever since meeting Ae, Vio had felt an even greater creative energy. E sometimes fed him a little bit of emself, boosting his imagination by harmonizing the right melodies with his. Every day he was able to work on his creatures, the creepy *its* that lived fully-formed in his mind and that he lived vicariously through. So many so-called “monsters” populating his notebooks (which were hidden in places where, hopefully, his mother wouldn’t find them when she came through to clean his room).

The current creation looked out toward the viewer, its beetle-black eyes set with a threatening interest. Vio was huddled close, getting the shading just right so that when he pulled back, the tree seemed ready to rise up and devour the next victim.

“Vio?”

It sounded like an echo from a thousand miles away.

“Vio? Vio?”

Closer now. Maybe just a few miles off.

“Vio?”

He blinked. That one was close. He looked around and he found that someone was standing next to him. Mrs. Callum, the art teacher. She was an older woman with curly, light orange hair that never looked brushed and glasses that looked too small for her face. Vio liked her. She didn’t treat him like a mistake of nature. And even more than that, she liked his drawings. That was why he had told her his name, because he had been sure she would call him by it.

Like she was doing now.

“Hey there Vio,” she said once she saw he was back in the world with her.

“Hi,” he answered.

She smiled and looked over his shoulder at his sketchbook. He leaned it into a better angle for her to see.

“Wow,” she said with a sincere tone—not the teacherly one she used to encourage students with less skill. “That’s really something.”

Vio didn’t know what to say, but that was ok. Mrs. Callum never expected him to speak unnecessarily.

“Well, I hate to interrupt you, but you’ve been working for an hour, and it doesn’t look like you’ve eaten lunch yet.” She looked to the paper bag that stood upright on the couch next to him, still full with contents.

“Oh.” Not only had he not eaten, but if it had been an hour since lunch started, that meant, “I’m late.”

Mrs. Callum shook her head.

“Don’t worry about that. You just stay here and take all the time you need. This is my free period so I’ve still got half an hour before my next class.”

Vio smiled. Staying with her sounded a lot better than walking into the middle of class and having everyone turn to stare at him as he made the long awkward walk to his desk.

“Ok.”

“May I take a look?” she asked, gesturing to his sketchbook.

Vio looked down at his carnivorous tree once more before nodding and holding the book out for her to take. She did and sat down on the other end of the couch to inspect the piece while Vio opened his bag. As he watched Mrs. Callum’s profile, he wondered what the music of *her* soul felt like.

He bet he would like it.

## CHAPTER 4

They didn't see a movie.

The only thing in the theater that Cory had any interest in was *12 Monkeys*, and since that wasn't Carolyn's taste, they decided to do something else.

"Oh I know," Carolyn said with an excited smile. "How about we go get manicures? You can get some nice fresh black polish and I'll get something fun. Something bright. Maybe teal." She held up her hand to show the pastel pink she currently had. "What do you think?"

Cory didn't really think anything. Xe would have preferred a movie because that would have been time free from the need to talk. But since that had been removed as an option, everything else seemed about the same.

"I think teal will look good with your skin tone," xe said with a bland face. Xe didn't actually have any opinion on the match between her even, peachy skin and a bright teal, but it seemed like the kind of thing she would want to hear.

"Oh," she cooed, "aren't you sweet. I think so too actually. So that's a yes then?"

"Yeah, let's do it."

She grinned and tussled xir hair.

"Ohhh, you're so much *fun!*"

Xe had no idea how the fuck she thought that since xe was feeling about as lively as a rock, but she was in a manic delusion, and there was nothing to do but ride it out. Xe stared ahead, xir elbow on the door and head on xir fist, as she drove them to her favorite nail salon. Despite being walk-ins, they only had to wait ten minutes to start their service, and while Carolyn engaged with her manicurist, Cory's caught on quickly that xe wasn't interested in talking. It was nice to just sit and tune xir mind to a whole different channel for a while.

Then the next thing on Carolyn's agenda was groceries. She didn't have a habit of cooking, so most meals were either from a restaurant or whatever one of them threw together for themselves. But she liked strolling through the aisles and imagining what she *could* make. She probably even thought that if she had all the ingredients, by some force of nature she would be *compelled* to make it.

But it didn't work out that way very often, and honestly that was fine. None of them, not Cory or Christopher or even Carolyn herself, cared about sitting down to a family dinner. Carolyn just got caught up in the moment. So Cory just made sure to add into the basket whatever xe wanted available in the house for xemself while also agreeing with Carolyn that every dinner idea she thought of, when she held up the source of her inspiration, sounded great.

A lot of what Carolyn bought for those ideas often went unused and forgotten until they went bad, which was why Cory had developed a habit of bringing some of it over to the guys' house during practice. Those three needed more than just the pizza and other cheap takeout they could afford.

They weren't the only ones. The city was full of people going hungry, subsisting on nutritional garbage. Meanwhile Cory's walk-in pantry collected an unwieldy amount of organic grains and pastas, exotic spices, and expensive oils, and the fridge brimmed with dozens of fruits and vegetables, locally-produced oat and rice milks, and artisan condiments. And much of it simply sat around waiting. Waiting until it went bad or Carolyn got annoyed enough by its presence to get rid of it. Cory couldn't feed the city, but xe could at least feed people xe knew, and prevent such a disgusting waste at the same time.

How much of the current haul would xe end up giving away? Xe made bets with xemself as xe glared out xir window, out at all the passing buildings, looking so big and arrogant—especially compared to the withered and weathered man over there on the sidewalk, pushing his

possessions around in a shopping cart. Cory's stomach went hard upon seeing him. When had he last had something to eat?

//Fucked up. *Fucked up.*//

Cory felt xir heart pulse toxic anger through xir chest, hot as acid. The buildings were too big and too ugly, just like the system they represented. How many more worn-out vagrants were out there, meandering through the city streets, dirty and disdained? Too many.

Cory's vision went rhythmically in and out of focus while xir heartbeats got hotter and hotter.

//Destroy. Destroy. Destroy.// Xir soul throbbed with the desire. //Destroy it all.//

Being poor cost so much—people paid for it with their health and lives. But human lives didn't matter, not to the universe. The universe was too big to care about such tiny, evanescent specks. Which meant the specks should care about each other. They were all here, together, living their speck lives and sharing this speck planet. It wasn't right for such short lives to be so hard. It wasn't right that so many things were designed specifically to *make* it hard. It wasn't right that the design was so goddamn *big*.

The car stopped at a red light, and as Cory watched the old man, bundled in three coats and a knit hat, push forward with shuffling steps that seemed to take all his strength, xir own comfort made xem sick. Why was just being alive a competition? It wasn't *right*.

The light turned green and Carolyn sped forward.

“So, what do you want to do for dinner?” she asked.

Cory wrinkled xir nose. She probably didn't even notice the man. And even if she did, she would probably just call him an eyesore and say he should go somewhere else. To her, *he* was the problem.

Xe unwrinkled xir nose before xe shrugged.

“I mean, usually I just grab something to eat before I meet the guys for practice.”

“Oh. Right.” She was disappointed, but amazingly enough she didn’t argue. “When do you head over there?”

“I try to be there by six.”

“I see.” She took a breath to cheer herself up. “Well tell me a little about these guys. What do they do? Are they in school, or do they have jobs?”

Cory kept staring out the window and spoke lazily.

“They’ve all graduated. I think Wyatt studied political science and some economics. Gabriel did history or classical something, maybe philosophy? I think he learned a language in there too—like, his third or fourth.”

Xe paused to remember the list, slowly counting them off to xemself on xir fingers.

“English, Hebrew . . . Arabic . . . and then . . . Greek? Latin? Something.”

Xe dismissed the list by waving xir hand.

“And Zach did some kind of science program I think, like engineering maybe. I don’t know. But he hated it. He hated school so he doesn’t talk about it much. Right now they all have like, random jobs to help pay bills, but I think they’re all hoping the band goes somewhere because they don’t talk about any other plans. Their old singer was the only one who got a job with his degree, so that’s why he left.”

“I see.” There was a pause in which Cory didn’t have anything else to say, and then Carolyn said, “Maybe I can listen to some of your music sometime.”

Cory felt a strange lurch in xir stomach. Something like panic, but also, a disorienting surprise at her sudden interest. Xe hated that part of xem was actually excited by it. Xe squashed that immature instinct down.

“You probably won’t like it. We’re a rock band. It’s not like what I play on the piano.”

That was the only kind she had ever heard. The night xe had met Ae and experienced xir kind of enlightenment—or awakening, or whatever you wanted to call it—along with all the other songs that had found their completed form, xe had been able to compose a new song just for Carolyn’s birthday the next day. Xe had played it for her that morning on the piano. It was an elegiac sound, springing from deep within Cory as a hybrid of classical and modern notes, and it poured so deep into Carolyn that she was moved to tears. *Actual tears*. When xe was done, she had hugged xem and thanked xem for something so lovely and special and had said how amazing xe was for composing such music.

Cory had plenty more music like that inside xem, but so far, the band had not incorporated any classical instruments. Cory wanted to, but considering the venues they performed at, it didn’t seem too practical. So composing xir piano music continued to be a solo project.

“It doesn’t have to be piano music for me to like it,” she insisted.

“Ok,” Cory said slowly, “what *do* you like?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She tapped the steering wheel as she thought. “A variety of things. James Taylor. Joni Mitchell. Carole King. Linda Ronstadt. Fleetwood Mac. Steely Dan. Phil Collins.”

“Yeah,” Cory said, xir suspicions confirmed. “I don’t think you’d like our sound.”

Carolyn smiled playfully. “Well we won’t know that until I hear it, right?”

Cory wanted to scream.

*What the fuck are you doing?!? Leave me the fuck alone, Jesus fucking Christ!*

Xe took a deep breath.

“Guess not.”

“So maybe you can play me something. Do you have any recordings?”

Xe did.

“No.” Xe tapped the door. “I mean, *I* don’t. But *they* might.”

“Then ask them if you can borrow some.”

“Sure.”

Xe could say that, because by tomorrow she would be back to normal and want to keep a good ten feet between them at all times. God, she was like a real-life Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

They got back to the house and Cory helped her unload the car, and then it was time for xem to get the fuck out of there.

“All right. See you. I’ll be back late,” xe said, pulling out xir keys.

“Ok honey. Come here real quick.”

She held out her arms to xem, and xe felt the recoil in xir muscles to the invitation. But xe walked into it anyway. Xe let her wrap her arms around xem and kiss xir cheek and say close to xir ear, “Thanks for coming out with me today. It was really nice having you with me.”

Xe gave her a lukewarm hug back.

Xe wasn’t the kind of teen that felt an urge to rebel against their parents, as if parents were inherently uncool. Xe didn’t have anyone to impress anyway. So hugging xir mom in itself wasn’t the problem, xe just wished it could feel real. Xe wanted parents xe loved and respected—and who loved and respected xem. Parents xe felt comfortable with. Instead, xe had parents who actively pushed xem away and called it “encouraging xem to be independent”.

And because xe didn’t struggle against her intermittent displays of affection, she could interpret it to mean that xe liked her, when to Cory, not struggling was just the path of least resistance. Struggle would cause her to flare up and extend the interaction to something much longer and more confrontational than it needed to be.

Cory didn't like being misunderstood that way, but xe also wasn't a fan of being screamed at. So xe made a choice.

"Sure," xe answered with effort. "Thanks for bringing me."

Xe hated lying.

God fucking *shit* xe hated lying. The words felt so wrong. Saying them made xem want to bite off and swallow xir own tongue so it would roast down in the fire pit of xir stomach.

But xe did it. Because xe had to with her. Xe had to give her what she wanted.

Xe didn't know why. It wasn't like her being happy this way was a win for him. What exactly was xe gaining by catering to her good mood? Xe couldn't explain it, not entirely.

She pulled back to look in xir eyes with an emotional smile and cupped xir face in her hands. They were the same height, around five-foot-ten, but Carolyn was right that xe could still grow to be taller than her. So this was probably one of her last chances to not have to look up at him. Xe wondered if that would at all change the amount of power she felt she had over xem.

No, xe decided quickly. Probably not.

After all, Christopher was six feet tall and she didn't filter her anger around him at all.

"Ok," she said, patting xir cheeks twice before letting go. "Be safe out there, and have fun."

*Be safe.*

That was rich, coming from her.

"Yeah. Thanks."

Xe waved with the hand that held xir keys and went out the back door, working very hard to not look like xe was in a rush. Xe got in xir car, Ae's nebula swirling around xem with good vibes to wash away the jangling ire screeching inside xem, and took off with Soundgarden playing on the radio.

Six o'clock traffic on a Friday wasn't fun, but it was less suffocating than being with Carolyn. Ae had manifested eir human form in the front passenger's seat, so they rode together, listening to the radio play mostly-decent songs. Soundarden, Alice in Chains, Nirvana, Stone Temple Pilots, Pearl Jam. It was all fine. The best that was out there, certainly. But Cory needed something else. Something xe couldn't find anywhere unless xe made it xemself.

Xe was looking forward to practice.

Xe followed the route xe knew to get to the university and then the inner roads of campus to get to the library. By then there wasn't a lot of foot traffic, so Cory didn't have to swerve and stop for a lot of careless pedestrians roaming in and out of the streets, and there were plenty of parking spots to choose from. Xe and Ae walked together to the library's entrance, Cory with hands shoved into xir jacket pockets and Ae moving with a lightsome grace that seemed at odds with eir motorcycle-rebel fashion.

When they got inside, they waited together near the door, Ae scanning the space curiously with both eir gold eyes and nebula tongues. They already knew the flavors of most people here, the usual industrious students determined to study even up to the closing hour on a Friday night. But there was almost always at least one new song among the rest that Ae just had to taste.

While Ae was occupied with that, Cory kept xir own nebula tucked in and away from everyone so xe could immerse in xir own vibrations and listen to xir own songs for refreshment.

It didn't take long for Aki and Vio to come into view, walking toward them together, Vio with his backpack strapped neatly onto his shoulders and one sketchbook hugged tight to his chest—since it gave him something to do with his arms. Aki also had a backpack, but she was holding a thick textbook in her arms because it would add too much weight on her shoulders.

Aki smiled broadly to show she saw them. Ae responded with a fluid wave and Cory popped xir chin up. They didn't say anything until they had all made it back outside.

"So how are you two doing?" Aki asked.

"Could be better," Cory muttered.

//You will be,// Ae assured.

//I know.//

"I'm well," Ae said in eir mellow voice. "You?"

"My brain's a little fried. It's been a long week and I'm *drowning* in pathology," she said, lifting up the textbook. "So I'm looking forward to tonight."

Cory didn't know what their plans were, but Zoe had the night off from work, so the two of them were going to get some time together. Xe knew how vital that was, so xe wished them well.

"You know, I'm not the best student or anything," xe said, "but I'm pretty sure studying twelve hours a day isn't the best way to learn. Probably the only thing it *is* good for is frying your brain."

"I don't study *twelve* hours a day," Aki protested. "Ten max. And I take breaks."

"Uh-huh."

Cory opened the back door so Vio could set his stuff inside.

"Don't take that tone with me," she said with a good-natured smile.

"Oh I'm sorry, would you prefer I use a more *upbeat* tone when I'm being skeptical?"

"I will throw my textbook at you."

"No you won't. I know how expensive it is."

"But you'll be the one who owes me a new copy if it breaks."

"Why would *I* owe you?"

“Because it would be your fault. I wouldn’t throw it if you didn’t make me.”

“You sound like you’re trying to become a lawyer, not a doctor.”

Vio’s backpack was in the car, but he was still hugging his sketchbook as he stood watching them banter.

“Biomedical researcher, you mean.”

“Uh-huh.”

Aki lifted the textbook with a playfully fierce look, and while Vio hopped away from Cory as fast as a reflex, Cory held xir arms out to offer xemself as an easy target.

“Jerk,” Aki muttered while bringing her textbook back to her chest.

“Yeah, I know.”

Aki came up and nudged xem with her elbow.

“You know I’m *kidding*, right?” Because she was the shortest among them, Cory had to look down to see her eyes. “You’re not *actually* a jerk.”

Cory raised an eyebrow.

“Why are you so serious all of a sudden?”

“Because it sounded like *you* were. I don’t want you thinking you’re a bad person or something.”

Cory furrowed xir brows.

Xe didn’t know what xe thought xe was. Good person, bad person, something in between, xe didn’t know. How was xe supposed to determine something like that, especially when there were so many conflicting philosophies on how that worked? Was that something for xem to decide, or was it everyone else who got to have an opinion? Xe certainly knew what *xe* thought was good or bad in other people. Well, probably better to not worry about that kind of thing. Xe just wanted to be xemself, whatever that was.

But the issue seemed important to Aki, so xe didn't want to dismiss it in her face.

"Ok," xe said, then after a short pause, "Thanks."

She nodded.

"Of course. And thanks for taking care of Vio." She smiled at him. "Have a good night, ok?"

Vio was still standing off on his own, out of the line of fire, and nodded.

"You too."

"Oh I will," she said with a grin.

"Well hurry up and go have it," Cory said.

Aki gave xem a look.

"You may not be a bad person, but I'll still slap you."

"Not if I drive away first," xe said while heading to the other side of the car.

"That's right, you better run!"

"Hey, I'm trying to do you a *favor*," Cory said, opening xir door. "Cause it looks like I have to leave before you'll actually go and meet Zoe."

"Oh I see, well then *thank you* for being so considerate."

"You're *welcome*." Xe then made a conceding gesture. "Guess I'm not a complete jerk after all."

Aki shook her head with a smile while Vio and Ae both got in their seats too. She waved when the car started up and waited until it was rolling down the road before turning to walk to her own car.

Cory turned the radio off, in part for Vio's sake since he usually didn't like excess noise, and in part because it was easier to hear him without it.

“So, what do you want to eat?” he asked over his shoulder. There was a pause while Vio’s brain caught up with the words he had just heard and while he gave it some thought. It didn’t take too long to come up with an answer.

“Jason’s.”

Of course.

Cory was already headed that way by default.

Vio liked that place. It was familiar, for one, and he could get something both meatless and good. Ever since Vio had read *Charlotte’s Web* as a little kid, he had felt a terrible guilt at eating meat, but as long as he was living at home, he was forced to eat whatever his mom made. And she did not share his broken heart at the thought of an animal being killed for someone else’s sake, nor did she have any interest in making a separate meal for him. As far as she was concerned, he needed to get over it and just be normal.

But Vio couldn’t get over it. Wilbur hadn’t wanted to die. No animal wanted to die. No one alive wanted to die. So it seemed obvious to him: it was just as wrong to kill a pig, or a cow, or a chicken, or anything, as it was to kill another human being. But it was especially wrong when it came to animals because it was done for something as selfish and frivolous as *taste*. Which wasn’t even necessary since there were plenty of other good-tasting foods out there. Every time he ate what his mother put in front of him, he felt a debilitating nausea. He was a cannibal. These animals may not be “human” by species, but they felt pain and emotions, just like humans. To Vio, that made them the same. Eating chicken felt like eating his own arm that someone had cut off, breaded, and fried.

He didn’t understand how no one else seemed to feel the same thing.

But it was just another reason he didn’t feel human. Humans seemed to define themselves as a singularly special species above all others. Humans defined themselves by being able to

cook and eat anything they wanted. Vio didn't want to be defined that way. Vio didn't want to be that way at all.

So he was grateful for any chance he had to choose his own food, which Cory, Aki, and Zoe always provided.

As usual, Ae didn't order anything, just enjoyed the samples of people's vibrations while they all cast curious glances eir way. Vio got a large sandwich stuffed so full of vegetables they threatened to spill out of the wrapping. If they had been planning to stay, Cory probably would have ordered a baked potato, but since they were heading out, xe ordered a veggie wrap.

Cory had had vague thoughts about meat on xir own, but it wasn't until xe met Vio that it really clicked. It was just one more thing xe found distasteful: sex, gender, god, alcohol, drugs, money, meat. It was actually pretty easy to add things to the list. Just point to something ubiquitous in society, and xe would most likely reject it.

They took their drinks and their bag of food and got back in the car. The smell of roasted vegetables grew strong as they sped down the street, but Cory didn't mind. Better than xir car smelling like greasy meat or cheese.

Cory parked on the street in front of the house since the guys' driveway was full of their own cars. It was a one-story house, which was convenient, since it meant they didn't have to lug any equipment up flights of stairs. The three could already hear music playing when they got close to the door, and since Cory had a paper bag in one hand and xir drink in the other, Ae was the one who knocked.

Wyatt opened the door.

"Hey! Come on in."

He stepped aside and they filed through. Ae and Cory stopped in the living room where the only couch was pushed up against a jaundiced wall and the rest of the space was dedicated to

the drums, speakers, guitars, and mic stand. Ae perched emself on the arm of the couch, sitting with eir back to the wall, while Cory adjusted xemself into the lumpy cushion closest to Ae. Xe opened the bag and took out xir food before handing the rest to Vio, who took the bag and then scurried to the kitchen so he could eat out of the way on one of the barstools. The small dining table was too cluttered for his comfort.

Zach and Gabriel were warming up and Wyatt went back to join them at his drum set after he closed the door. While Cory ate, xe let the music carry xem somewhere pleasant. It wasn't the euphoria xe got from Ae, but it was the best sound from Earth xe had encountered. And xe could understand why they chose to pursue music more than anything else. They were *good*. Zach may not have liked school, but that was probably because he was wired for the guitar instead.

Music was also the obvious choice because they were fairly unemployable in any career that would make them money. They refused to compromise their look, which comprised several piercings, some of which were on their faces, and tattoos that would be difficult to hide. The criminal records didn't help either. Nothing big, mostly related to protesting. But still, it was enough to make employers wary, so the jobs they managed to get were low-end and headed nowhere. So with other opportunities blocked on one hand and their skills at their instruments on the other, betting everything on music just made sense.

Though they would still be doing it anyway, even if they could get better jobs. They loved the music too much not to.

Ae watched them play with unblinking eyes, looking so much like a cat it was easy to imagine a tail rising behind them to flick and curl back and forth. Instead of a tail though, that same energy manifested in eir hair, which began to rise up and move in waves—too neatly to be

from wind. Pristine locks undulated slowly, looking like glossy seaweed moving with the ocean's currents.

And more than that, Ae's body began to shift and ripple, distorted as if seen through the surface of moving water, or like glitches in a TV screen when the connection wasn't quite right.

When the music was good, e sometimes lost eir focus on eir human form. E could become more fluid than a human should be, or more stony, keeping eir body set motionless in one pose that would cause an average person cramps.

But it was ok here.

The band mates were too busy with their work to notice anything unnatural about em, even from the corner of their eyes. They didn't know about Ae, what e was or where e came from. Not because telling them would be dangerous, Cory just thought that if they knew, they would want something from em. They might want to take advantage of Ae's shapeshifting ability to somehow advance their career.

And maybe they wouldn't, but xe didn't want to risk being put in that position.

Ae emself didn't really care either way. The whole world could know about em and it wouldn't matter. Humans were no threat to em. But e did understand that advertising eir true form would bring a lot of attention to both em and Cory, so e made some effort to avoid being discovered. Only when someone like Cory or Vio crossed eir path could e not help but dive into those vibrations and reveal emself. Encountering these three for the first time hadn't quite reached that level.

It had been at Mike's.

A Thursday.

Cory was up on the stage with xir guitar, putting on a solo performance—just three or four songs, and then xe would go.

While Ae was close to the stage, eir body riding the rhythms and eir nebula spreading out in rolls, e could feel the interest of the audience, especially the ones who felt a connection to the music. E felt them bright as the moon compared to the weak star lights of the rest.

These three were among them.

Ae didn't know them, but they tasted good, each one a flavor that combined well with Cory's. And Ae perceived their intent to approach.

Ae could have gone deeper in and learned more—about their lives, their goals, everything. But e didn't want to be distracted. Cory's music was too good. And e figured that if they were planning on coming forward when Cory was done, e could learn whatever e wanted to know then.

So Cory finished xir set and stepped off the stage without much notice of the crowd's response. Xe was ready to take off, but Ae held xem back, sharing the information e had gathered through a quick vibration.

//I don't want to talk to anyone,// Cory vibrated back.

//I know, but maybe it'll be interesting. The vibes felt good.//

Ae didn't think that about many people, and Cory was inclined to trust eir opinion. So Cory sighed heavily.

//Fine.//

They waited by walking slowly away from the stage, making them a fairly easy target to catch up to. It was Zach who appeared at Cory's open side with an eager face.

“Hey,” he said quickly. Cory didn't like how close he was and recoiled, but Zach wasn't discouraged. “Hey. Cory right?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, I’m Zach. Are you free right now? My buddies and I, we were wondering if we could talk.”

Cory looked past Zach to where he had pointed and saw two more guys—they all looked maybe mid-twenties, but then again, Cory didn’t believe it was possible to tell someone’s age just by looking at them. Not accurately, at least. After all, he was seventeen and got pegged for late-twenties all the time.

Cory wasn’t used to getting invited to talk—or to do anything—so it felt vaguely uncomfortable. But he agreed with Ae, they did have a pretty good vibe going on.

Fuck it, what the hell.

Cory glanced at Ae—his human face anyway—then said, “Yeah. Sure.”

Zach clapped his hands excitedly.

“Great! Come on, I’ll buy you both a beer.”

“We don’t drink,” Cory said as they moved to follow.

“Oh, really? Are you uh, part of that straight-edge movement or something?”

Cory shrugged.

“I wouldn’t say I’m part of any movements or scenes. I just do what I want. If there’s a movement that’s doing the same thing, it’s a coincidence.”

“Oh ok, well, cool. Then I guess I *won’t* buy you a beer. I can get you something else.”

“Water’s all I need.”

“Ok, cool, cool.”

They got to the table, and Zach grabbed an empty chair from another to make five seats and gestured for Cory and Ae to make themselves comfortable. As they all sat down, Zach made introductions.

“All right. So. Guys, this is Cory. And . . . ?” His voice drifted off as he made a questioning face.

“Ae,” e answered, understanding the meaning.

“Ae,” Zach repeated, nodding. “Cool, cool. So Cory and Ae, this is Gabriel”—he indicated with his hand while Gabriel waved—“and Wyatt.” Another gesture and another wave.

“Hey,” Cory greeted, popping up his chin and a few fingers.

“All right. So. Cory. To get straight to it,” Zach said, leaning forward on his crossed arms. “We’ve got a band. We’ve been together since eighth grade, actually. But our lead singer, he just got a job in another state, so he’s gonna be leaving us. Like, soon. So we’re looking for someone to take his place. And we heard you just now and . . .” He looked over to Gabriel and Wyatt, shaking his head with a kind of awe. “I mean, *damn*. You’re great. So we wanted to see if you were interested.”

Zach looked like he was wound up tight, one hand clenching his arm and the other in a shaking fist, his face strained with hope and anxiety. Cory was pretty sure xe could feel his foot tapping rapidly below the table.

The situation was completely foreign. Someone was actually seeking xem out, wanting xem to join something. It was *weird*.

But their vibes were undeniably appealing, even just on the surface. It would be nice to have a few more people like that around.

“Well, I’d need to hear what your music sounds like before I can say yes,” xe answered slowly.

“Oh yeah! Totally, absolutely, no doubt,” Zach agreed. “I was just asking if you were even interested enough to come listen to a demo.”

“I mean . . . sure, yeah. Might as well.”

Zach clapped his hands again.

“Great! Fucking *great!* Here, let me give you our address, and phone number. Zoe!” He twisted his neck toward the bar. “Hey Zoe!”

Cory looked to the bar too and saw Zoe look up. She gave Zach a *look* then called him over with her hand. Zach jumped out of his chair and sped to the counter.

“You guys know Zoe?” Cory asked to Gabriel and Wyatt.

“Yeah, we went to the same high school,” Gabriel said. “And we were in the same punk scene for a while.”

“She’s actually the one who suggested we come hear you play tonight. Thought we’d make a good fit.”

“That right?”

Cory looked to the counter again. Zoe was handing Zach a pen, a scrap of paper, and a bottle of water. While Zach scribbled something down, she saw xem and waved by wiggling her fingers playfully, like she knew they were talking about her.

“Yep,” Wyatt confirmed with a nod.

After he handed Zoe her pen, Zach rushed back to his seat.

“Here,” he said, passing over the water to Cory. Xe opened it and began to drink—xir throat was pretty dry—while Zach pointed to the paper. “So, here’s our address. We’ve got everything set up inside for practice. And this is our number.” He pushed it forward and Cory picked it up with xir free hand while continuing to drink. “So, what would work for you to come by?”

Cory wiped xir lips with the back of xir hand.

“How’s tomorrow? I’m out of school by three.” The bell rang at 2:30, but then there was all the traffic to think about, first in the halls and then in the parking lot and then on the street.

“Tomorrow’s good for us, but I don’t think we’ll all be home until about six.”

“That’s fine. I’ve got nothing else going on.”

Xe didn’t even have to check. Xe didn’t have any other commitments that could conflict.

“Cool. Then just come on over. Or call and leave a message if something comes up.”

“Sure.”

“Are you gonna come too?” Zach asked, leaning forward to get a better look at Ae.

“Of course,” e answered with a smile. “I live for good music.”

Zach grinned.

“Hell yeah, us too. So uh.” He picked up his own bottle and swished it around a bit.

“How long have you two known each other?”

As he took a drink, they looked at each other, and Ae smiled again with mysterious amusement. Cory drummed xir fingers on the table, considering how to answer, then said casually, “Forever. Pretty much.”

It was true enough, even though it had only been two weeks since Ae had crashed into xir life.

“Are you two a thing?”

One of Cory’s eyebrows went up.

“A ‘thing’?”

“Yeah. You know,” he said, pointing to each of them with the hand that gripped the bottle’s neck. “A couple.”

They looked at each other again. Cory didn’t know how to answer that, and if xe didn’t know, then Ae certainly didn’t. Working with inadequate human language and concepts was still difficult for em. Cory drummed xir fingers again while considering Ae’s face, as if the answer was in there somewhere.

Confused by their pause, Zach said, “I’m just asking. If it’s complicated, I get it.”

Cory shook his head.

“I don’t think it’s complicated at all. I just don’t think there’s a good word for it.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked curiously. “Then how would you put it?”

Cory shrugged.

“We’re just . . . I mean, I don’t want to call it ‘soulmates’ or anything sappy like that.

Soulmates are bullshit anyway. Romantic bullshit.” Xe didn’t know if xe actively decided to get into it, but the vibe xe was getting from the guys made it seem like it would be ok to just dive right in. So he did. “Nobody is *made* for anyone else, you know? And there’s nothing dramatic like destiny or god working things out to make sure two people meet. So like, I wouldn’t put it like that. We’re not romantic, or lovey-dovey, or anything like that. And we’re not having sex either. But we’re like . . . as close as we can possibly be. Like, we just *know* each other, like, *perfectly*. You know? But like, does that make us a ‘couple’? Or a ‘thing’? I mean, I don’t know. If you say that, most people think you’re dating or fucking, right? And we’re not, so, those don’t seem like the right word. But we’re like this.”

Xe held up a hand with two fingers crossed.

“And like, you can’t just say we’re ‘friends’, not even ‘best friends’, because no one takes that seriously once you’re out of elementary school, right? So what are we? I don’t know. If it were me, I’d probably say ‘companions’, but like, that’s not something people really say. I guess there aren’t enough people out there who need a word for a relationship that’s close but not romantic or sexual, otherwise we’d have one. Feels like there’s no easy way to put it. We just have to explain it so people don’t assume things. You know?”

“Huh,” Zach said, looking at them thoughtfully over his bottle. “Yeah, you know, you’ve got a good point there.”

“Yeah,” Wyatt agreed. “It’s like, it’s not just that people aren’t thinking about that kind of thing, they’re making it practically *impossible* to. Because everything’s all about love and dating and marriage and shit, right? It’s all over the place. There’s no other option. You either fall in love with the love of your life and get married and have kids, or you die miserable and alone. That’s it. Those are the options people talk about.”

“Seriously,” Gabriel said enthusiastically. “I mean, none of us have ever had a *real* girlfriend, have we?”

“Nope,” Wyatt and Zach said together, then Zach went on, “We’ve had some flings here and there, because that’s just what you do, right? You pick someone out of who’s available at school and you go out. Just because. Because you *have* to.”

“Or you’re like me,” Gabriel injected with a wry smile, “and you get set up on blind dates. By your traditional parents. With a ‘nice Jewish girl’. And then they look so disappointed when I’m not ready to marry her after one dinner.”

Zach laughed.

“It’s all so stupid, isn’t it. I know I always had more important stuff to do than go out on a date. Man, why the fuck did I bother?”

“Why did *any* of us?” Wyatt said. “Waste of time in the end.”

“For sure.”

“Oh but you *know*,” Gabriel sneered, “it’s just because none of us have found ‘the one’ yet. That’s all it is. Once we do, everything will change and we’ll be true believers then.”

Wyatt and Zach snickered.

“Right. Yeah. The mythical ‘the one’ who will totally light up our world and make us complete and show us what we’ve been missing all this time.”

“Ha. God, can you imagine any one of us *married*?”

“*Fuck* no.”

“Or with *kids*?”

“Jesus *Christ*, no.”

They all shook their heads and laughed at the absurdity, then took drinks from their bottles.

Cory actually felt a tightness unwind a little in his chest, hearing some people finally talk some goddamn *sense* about all this. *Christ* it was refreshing.

“So, Ae,” Zach said while setting his bottle on the table. “I don’t mean to be rude or offend, I’m just the stupid one so I’m struggling here. But like . . . are you . . . a guy? Or a girl?”

While the tightness in Cory’s chest returned, Ae grinned in a genuine way that put Zach a little more at ease.

“You’re not stupid,” e said, “and I’m not offended. I like it when people can’t tell.”

“Oh really?”

E nodded, and then Gabriel and Wyatt sighed.

“Well that’s good to hear, because I can’t tell either.”

“Yeah, same.”

Ae grinned wider.

“Fantastic.” E waited a few beats as if e was going to leave it at that, then said, “But to answer your question, I’m not either.”

“Huh,” Zach said, considering em with genuine contemplation. “Well, I mean, if anyone’s not a guy or a girl, it’s you.”

Gabriel and Wyatt nodded.

“Well, it’s nice to hear you say that,” Ae said, “but you should know: Cory is the same. I know Cory *looks* like a man to you, but to us, that whole idea that people have to be one or the

other is . . . perplexing. So, if you can accept that about *me*, I hope you'll be willing to accept it about Cory too."

Ae had a very soothing voice. Calm and resonant. Pitched right in that range of androgyny where it was deep enough to be male and high enough to be female, but with such a balance of timbre that it was impossible to determine with certainty that it was one or the other.

The band mates listened attentively, and even though there was other noise in the bar, including the current performer on stage, they didn't miss a word. Ae had that kind of hypnotic effect.

And Cory watched them from his seat, catching their glances when their eyes shifted in his direction. When Ae was done, Zach spoke first.

"Oh yeah, sure, no problem. It's cool. We're good with whatever, right?"

He looked at the other two and they both nodded.

"So like," Wyatt asked, "are you transgender? I've met some people like that. I mean, usually that's someone living the *opposite* of what they were born—like, born a man but became a woman, or the other way around. But so, if you just say you're not either, or anything, would that still be transgender?"

Cory shrugged.

"I don't know. I haven't heard enough about it to know."

"We learned about it in a gender studies class," he said, turning to Gabriel and bouncing his finger back and forth between them. "And there was a queer student organization that talked about it too. But I don't remember anyone ever mentioning just not being anything. That's pretty cool."

"Not many other people think so."

“Well that’s because *most* people are worthless idiots,” Zach said before finishing off the last of his beer.

And Cory agreed, but it was especially frustrating that society seemed specifically designed to cultivate worthless idiots. It would have been easier to write people off if they had actively chosen to be ignorant and intolerant on their own, but they were the symptom of a deeper problem, of systems that taught them to think certain ways without the tools or opportunities or incentives to question anything.

It was why the problem always seemed so overwhelming, so much bigger than just stupid people. It was a whole stupid fucking *world*. And if there wasn’t a way to demolish it and start from scratch, Cory just wanted out.

But for now, when it came to the band, xe was fine with being in.

Cory and Ae went to their house Friday afternoon, listened to the band play a few songs—with Zach providing the lead vocals since what’s-his-name couldn’t make it—and felt the connection.

Yes, these guys would work.

The sound was good, the lyrics were good, the vibe was good. So xe agreed to join that night, and as they spent the next few hours playing, Ae sat perched on the end of the couch’s arm.

Despite that good introduction, Zach showed he couldn’t keep up with Cory’s no-gender identity one hundred percent of the time. And it was annoying to various degrees, but Cory tried to focus on the music to get through it. It wasn’t like Zach was maliciously dismissing xir chosen identity. If anything, it was probably all that alcohol he drank suppressing or killing the brain cells that stored that piece of information.

Nothing Cory could do about *that*.

Cory rolled up the paper from xir wrap and slid it into the empty bag of chips. Xe sucked up the last of xir drink through the straw, got up to throw away the trash, refilled the cup with water. Then it was time to get started.

They played for a few hours, Cory taking a sip of water every now and then, Vio working rigorously on a drawing at the counter, and Ae staring from the couch, delight manifesting as a glow in eir gold eyes. Then the others declared it was time for a break, and Zach called to order a pizza.

Cory hadn't had a chance to pack groceries before xe came. Next time.

Ae still sat on the arm with eir ankles crossed and eir arms wrapped around eir bent legs, as e often did. Early on, the band mates had expected em to lose eir balance and fall, but by now they were used to eir comfort and poise in unconventional positions. Cory sat on the cushion, again tucked close to the same arm. Wyatt and Gabriel sat on the rest of the couch, and Zach, after pulling a can of beer from the fridge, dragged a chair from the dining table into the living room for himself.

“So Ae,” he asked while they waited for the delivery to come. “We’ve been wanting to ask you something.”

“Oh?”

Zach set the chair facing the couch and dropped down with legs spread.

“Yeah.”

“And what’s that?”

He plucked up the tab and the can hissed with a metallic *crack*.

“What the hell happened between you and that asshole cousin last night?”

With all three of them looking eir way, Ae’s lips spread out in a mischievous grin.

“Oh, I just disabused him of his faulty assumptions.”

“Huh.” Zach tapped the can, hoping that more explanation would come. Ae did that sometimes, waited until after a pause to speak again. And then sometimes e just left things at that. It seemed like this was one of those times. “Well whatever you did must have been pretty intense. The guy looked completely shaken up when he showed back up.”

In the sharpness of Ae’s smile was a glimpse of the grotesque Bryce had met.

“Being proved wrong can be quite traumatizing for some people.”

“Huh.”

Zach took a drink from his can. The three were still looking at Ae, waiting for more details. But Ae didn’t know what else e could describe but the truth, so e offered nothing, and they didn’t press.

“It’s why I’m so glad *you* were always so understanding,” e said instead, and eir gentle tone sounded vaguely threatening, like a predator lulling its prey to sleep. It made the hairs on their necks stand. “I’ve never had to prove anything for you. I simply told you I was not a man or woman, and you accepted.”

“Oh yeah, hey, no problem.” Zach lifted his can as if to do cheers. “I love it when people go outside the box. I think we need more of that. A lot more. So you do you and we’re right with you.”

“Cory too, right?” Ae asked to procure his explicit confirmation.

“Yeah, for sure. Cory too.”

He held out his can to Cory with another cheers gesture, then leaned back into the chair and called to the side, “And you too, Vio!”

But Vio didn’t hear. He was too absorbed for anything beyond his image to reach him.

“Man, that kid’s something else. I wish I could block things out as much as he can.”

The rest of their time was spent discussing and testing out lyrics as the band mates ate their pizza and Ae coaxed their inspiration with eir vibrations. By the time Cory said they were going to head out, they almost had a whole new song drafted.

“We’ll keep working on the sound and then we’ll be ready for you to try it with us,” Zach said as he walked them to the door.

“Sounds good.”

“All right, see you later.”

“Yeah, later.”

Vio walked out with his sketchbook hugged tight against his chest while Cory pulled xir keys out of xir pocket.

“Take care,” Ae said walking past Zach at the door.

“You too,” he answered with a nod. And Ae gave his soul a gentle brush, like a hand stroking through his hair, just for a little extra comfort. He seemed fine on the surface, but e sensed something dark down on the inside. Chords to make a heart feel heavy and numb. He felt it as he looked straight into eir eyes, just a slight retuning of his strings. He didn’t understand it, he couldn’t explain it, but if it made breathing a little easier, even for just one night, he would welcome it.

And with that, Ae gave him one last smile and then stepped out. Zach stared after em, his chest humming, and watched as the three got in Cory’s car and drove out of sight down the winding lane. Then he realized he was still standing there, and feeling like he had just snapped out of being half-asleep, he shook his head and closed the door.

The car was quiet.

Vio held his sketchbook with both hands while it lay on his thighs. He stared down at the cover as they drove. Night was easier on his eyes. Sometimes during the day, the sunlight could

be too harsh, but he didn't have to worry about that at a time like this. The hum of the engine and wheels were comforting. He wished he could crawl straight into bed from the car.

But it wasn't that easy.

His mother was always waiting for him. Because God forbid she just leave him alone.

The first time Cory had brought him home had been late October. Vio had told everyone very clearly, several times, that his mom expected him home by ten-thirty. He had been *very* clear. As clear as his mother had been with him. So he had trusted that they understood.

The ride home was fun because when Vio looked out the window, he could see all the Halloween decorations, the more elaborate ones making him excited enough to hop in his seat. Graveyards and monsters and zombified body parts and bloody crime scenes and chains and carved pumpkins—he loved it all.

Vio guided Cory along the way, saying “Turn here!” while pointing from behind, and then he pointed to his house, which was just a little further down the street. A small, old house in a neighborhood full of small, old houses, all with chain link fences around the backyards. His parents didn't do much decorating for Halloween, but years ago he and his three younger brothers had worked together to make ghosts out of old white sheets, and they pulled them out every October to hang in the one tree growing in the front yard. They also liked lighting up jack-o-lanterns, which was easy enough since there was always a large supply of candles in the house to take from.

But there was more than just ghosts and pumpkins when Cory rolled the car to a stop by the curb. Vio's chest went tight the instant he saw that his mother was sitting in a chair on the patio. Usually she waited inside for him. When she saw the car stop, she rose to her feet and started stomping down the walkway to the curb.

Vio's heart sped up.

“What time is it?” he asked quickly.

“A little after eleven.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Victor!” they heard her shout.

“I told you!” Vio said frantically. “I told you I needed to be home by ten-thirty. Ten-thirty! Why would you make me late?” *Aki* never made him late!

“Victor!” she shouted again before arriving beside the car and pounding on the windshield frame.

“Hey!” Cory shouted while opening the door to push her off. Then as he stepped out he added sharply, “Back off!”

“Who are you?” she demanded. “Where is Victor?”

“He’s right *here*, jeez,” Cory said, pointing to the back seat.

“Victor!” she shouted again, turning to the back door. “Get out right now! I told you ten-thirty, do you know what time it is?”

Vio was frozen in the seat, unable to open the door when his mother was glaring at the window.

“Hey, don’t blame him. I’m the one driving, remember?”

Hearing Cory talk back to his mother so brazenly made his heart throb and his head spin.

“We’re late because *I’m* late. I got lost finding this place, but it won’t happen again, all right?”

Cory didn’t sound *at all* like he was seeking forgiveness. It sounded like he was negotiating terms with an equal. Vio didn’t know whether he was pleased or mortified.

No, no. He was mortified.

“And who *are* you?”

While Vio's mother struck fear into his heart with just a look, Cory looked down at her with something between indifference and mild annoyance. How he wasn't shaking right now, with his mother looking at him with arms folded, was a mystery to Vio.

"I'm Cory. Vio's friend."

"Cory?" she repeated suspiciously. "I haven't heard Vio mention you before."

"So?" Just that one word gave Vio a near heart attack. "I don't talk to my parents about my friends either."

She narrowed her eyes and looked Cory up and down with a sharp, skeptical eye.

"You say you know Victor from school?"

"Yeah. We study together."

"Were you studying tonight?"

"Yeah."

"What were you studying?"

"Science mostly. Biology. Anatomy. Also some history."

Her expression made it clear she doubted him. But then she looked to the car and shouted again, "Victor! I told you to get out of the car! *Now!*"

"Hey!" Cory shouted back, and Vio genuinely felt like his soul had left his body for a moment. His mother turned to Cory with wide eyes. "Calm the f—" He caught himself and quickly revised. "Just calm down. And stop *yelling.*"

Her nostrils flared.

"Who do you think you are?"

"I told you. I'm Cory. I'm Vio's friend. And I don't like the way you're talking to him."

"He's *my son* and—"

“And what?” Cory interrupted hotly. “That means you get to just do whatever you want? No. And look, I told you, this was *my* fault, not his, so if you want to get mad and yell at someone, I’m right here. Go ahead. But I already told you it won’t happen again, so what more do you want?”

She was clearly not used to children speaking to her that way. Because they didn’t, not since she had effectively established herself as a figure to fear with her sons. But that didn’t extend to Cory. To her, she was just a small, weak person trying to browbeat even smaller, weaker people into submission inside the very small dominion over which she could exert control. It was all about power.

Because of course it was. People were always looking for a way to feel powerful—by having power over someone else.

Repulsive.

She turned to the car, and in a voice of terrifying calm, she said, “Victor. I’m not going to tell you again.”

Vio was still frozen. He didn’t want to go out there. He didn’t want to. He wanted to fade away. He wanted his flesh and bones to melt off and free him from this uncomfortable, miserable existence. He didn’t want to be seen anymore, and he definitely didn’t want to be touchable. Oh, what a relief that would be, to never have to be touched again.

But he got a different kind of relief instead.

Something like water began to flow through him and smooth down the fraying strands of his mind and heart. His pulse slowed, and the electric panic striking a thousand times per second at every nerve calmed. The belt around his chest loosened and he could breathe again. In a few heartbeats, the relaxation of a day at a spa retreat spread through him.

And suddenly his mother didn’t seem scary anymore.

There was a kind of cloud between them, a cushion around his heart protecting it from the effect of her intense aura. He looked at her through the window, and he felt light.

He took in a deep breath—it was so *easy*—and feeling weightless and free, he opened the door.

His mother glared, but it passed right through him without an effect.

“Get inside right now,” she ordered.

And he answered back simply, “Ok.” He turned to Cory to give xem a smile and a wave. “Thanks for the ride. See you Monday.”

Cory nodded and lifted xir hand up in a half-wave.

“Later.”

His mother scrunched her face in confusion. He wasn’t usually so breezy. No, he was *never* breezy, certainly not around her. She watched him glide up the walkway to the front door like he was possessed, then whipped her head around to Cory. But xe was already getting back into the car.

“Hey!” she called.

Cory paused to sigh with closed eyes then looked up at her from xir seat.

“What?”

“I don’t want my son hanging out with *you* if he’s going to start taking after you.”

Cory snorted.

“Vio’s not gonna turn out like me. He’s just getting the chance to finally be himself.”

“What does *that* mean? And what is that you call him? What is ‘Vio’?”

“That’s exactly my point.”

“*What* point? And hey, who are *you*?” she demanded, looking past Cory to Ae in the front passenger seat.

“Another friend of Vio’s.”

Ae smiled broadly and lifted a hand to wave. She furrowed her brow.

“We gotta go,” Cory said, “but we’ll be on time next week. I promise.”

Xe started the car and didn’t listen to anything Vio’s mother tried to say after that.

And Cory kept that promise. Ever since, they had arrived at Vio’s house no later than ten-thirty.

Cory rolled the car to a stop in the same place, right next to the curb, and Vio could see lights on through the front window where his mom was certainly waiting for him and his dad was probably watching TV. He looked at the clock on Cory’s dashboard. 10:29 PM.

“Good night, Vio,” Ae said, looking at him over eir shoulder, and as he looked into eir gold eyes, he felt the same water pour in and through him, heavy and soothing enough to wash away the tension he hadn’t even realized was in his chest. It was so normal for him to be tight that it wasn’t until he relaxed that he felt the difference.

//Thank you,// he said with his heart as he breathed in with unrestricted lungs.

Ae’s smile came with the sensation of floating in water. He could lie in those soothing currents all day. He opened the door, and the weight of his backpack when he pulled it onto his shoulders didn’t change his buoyancy. He saw his mom pull back the curtain and look out the window as he started gliding up the walkway, and when he was at the porch she opened the door for him. He saw her give the car a sour look, but she didn’t say anything about it, just closed the door hard as if it was a way to slam it in Cory’s face. Only then did Vio hear the car drive off again.

“Go get ready for bed,” she ordered.

Vio didn’t answer, just kept gliding through the house, past the kitchen and the crucifix at the mouth of the hallway. On the way to the bathroom, he passed the silent door of the room

shared by his two youngest brothers, Enrique and Ángel, who were probably only pretending to be asleep. After brushing his teeth, he went to the room he shared with his oldest-younger brother, Javier, who was hiding under his blanket while he played his muted Gameboy. The two didn't greet each other. Vio went straight to his own bed, still feeling a blissful state of ease, and lay down. The mattress softened into vibrations, leaving him floating, riding chords and rhythms that Ae had turned up in his soul.

“Soul”.

Vio had asked Ae about souls before, back near the beginning. Vio had realized early on how much he liked communicating with Ae because he didn't need to use words if he didn't want to. Words were hard sometimes. Working up the energy to speak could be hard. Figuring out a way to formulate ideas into prepackaged words could be hard. Just the idea of trying could be exhausting enough to make him give up before starting. And at the same time, exerting control over words when his excitement pushed their speed up to two hundred per minute was hard. Too much or too little, it was hard for him to get it right.

But it didn't feel like it was his own fault. Words weren't an easy thing to use. They were strange and clunky and inadequate. But they were what everyone used, so he had to use them too.

And “soul” was one of those words, one he had addressed out loud with Ae in order to ask if that was what e was, if that was what e touched inside other people. Ae had had to look inside Vio to find the exact meaning he had in mind, to read the information he had gathered throughout his life in order to build the concept.

Soul. A human person. An immortal spirit created by God in God's image and that is united with a corporeal body until that body dies, at which point it will ascend to heaven or fall to hell.

So many extra things Ae had to learn to understand Vio's "soul", but it was a simple transfer as Ae experienced all of Vio's years of church attendance. When Ae thought e understood his question, e answered, also using words, because it was fun to practice, "No, I don't think so, since I've never met God or anything like it."

"But, you *are* immortal, right? And you don't have a body like we do."

"I've never heard of any of us dying. It doesn't seem natural to just . . . stop existing. Not for us, anyway. And no, I don't have a body if I don't make it myself."

"But you're alive. You have *life* and *consciousness*."

"Yes."

"That *sounds* like a soul."

Ae asked with genuine curiosity, "Does a soul not need to come from God to be a soul?"

Vio scrunched his face.

"I don't know. Maybe. But if 'soul' isn't the right word, then what is?"

"I don't know," Ae answered.

"Where did you come from?"

"Out there."

"I know that. But how were you born?"

"I don't know. As far as I know, we've just always existed."

"But. So. But you've been alive for a long time. A really, really long time."

Ae had to just accept that that was true. Time was still a strange concept that only seemed to make sense inside this little bubble of a universe.

"And you've *never* thought about God? *Ever*?"

Ae gave him a neutral look.

“No. This concept of ‘god’ I’ve found here is . . . odd. There are so many different versions of god just on this one little planet, and so much fighting over which one is right. I’m surprised it matters so much. I haven’t encountered anything like a god here, yet so many humans seem very devoted to the idea. I don’t fully understand it.”

Vio began to rock back and forth in his seat.

“You can feel *everything* though,” he protested. “You just have to touch it with your . . .” He gestured vaguely with both hands to eir true form, spread out and shimmering like the Milky Way around them. “. . . *self*, and you can understand anything. But you’re saying you don’t feel God here? Or *anywhere*?”

Ae felt his rising anxiety and eir nebula began to stir in response.

“I’ve never come across anything that resembles what you call ‘God’ or any other god that I’ve learned about.” And having tasted billions of humans, Ae had learned about *many*.

“Well, what if God’s invisible even to you? God could do that. He makes himself invisible to us, he would be powerful enough to hide even from someone like you.”

“Why would God do that?” Ae asked, again with genuine interest.

“Because . . . God has to be invisible so that people can have *faith*. If he *shows* himself in a way that makes people absolutely know without a doubt that he exists, then they won’t *believe*.”

“Hm,” Ae said, pursing eir lips. “Why does God only want you to *believe* in him and not *know* him? That doesn’t sound like an effective way to have a relationship with someone.”

“It’s . . . It’s different with God. He’s not like us. He has a relationship with us through our spirits and our hearts.”

“Funny,” Cory muttered, unimpressed. “I thought I remember this whole big deal about Jesus being ‘God made flesh’ or something. Seems to me like if he really wanted to, he could

come down here and relate to us in person any time he wanted. Or you know, do like Ae does and just make himself known even without a body. Why's it got to be all about *faith*?"

"Because . . ."

"I mean really," Cory said when Vio struggled to think of an answer, "a god like that is just being a tease and then getting pissed off if we get bored and move on. How fucking egocentric do you have to be to think every goddamn person in the whole world needs to put you first before anything else, especially when you won't even talk to anyone?"

"God *does* talk to people! Through the bible, and prayer, and miracles."

"Oh come on, that's bullshit and you know it. You'd only say that if you actually *want* there to be a god, and why the fuck would you want that?"

"Because!"

The words were being difficult again. There was a disconnect, a wall, something preventing him from grabbing the words he needed to explain.

"Because *why*?"

Cory could have understood better. Xe could have reached out with xemself and tasted Vio's meaning. But pushing back aggressively was xir default mode.

"Do you actually *want* there to be something out there constantly watching and judging you while it toys with you in some fucked-up game it created and never gave you the choice of playing? A god like that is a fucking bully, and I'm not going to let some arrogant piece of shit tell me how to live my life. And I don't need a god to tell me what's good or bad or right or wrong or anything. And I don't need a god to give my life meaning. The only thing I'd want from a god at this point is for it to come down and clean up this fucking mess it's made, or that it let people make while it sat around doing nothing. If a god can't or just won't fix everything, then they aren't worth jack shit."

Vio shook his head rapidly and rocked back and forth with his hands against his temples.

He couldn't get the words. Words had abandoned him, leaving him alone, mute and flailing.

Despite his state, Cory pressed harder, "Why do you want to hang on to a belief in something that doesn't help anyone?"

And at that point, Ae finally intervened, reaching out to both of them to soothe down their souls' discordant shrieks. Cory's aggression faded, making room for guilt to spill in. Xe slumped back and crossed xir arms loosely as xe watched Vio's rocking slow. Shit, why did xe have to go and do that, let the flare get the best of xem? Xe had to be better than that.

Vio could feel that thought through the channel Ae had created among the three of them. And through Ae, Vio was able to convey his own thoughts, tangled and inarticulate and whole.

He wanted to believe in God because if God didn't exist, then everything he had learned from his mom and church was wrong. Everything she put him through because of her beliefs was for nothing. He didn't want to believe there was no purpose behind the suffering she had caused him.

At the same time, he didn't want to believe that he was a mistake. If God had made him, then he wasn't a mistake. He wasn't a freak of nature. He was "fearfully and wonderfully made", just as God wanted him to be. If there was no God, maybe everyone was right. Maybe he *was* just some mistake.

And if there was no God, how could there be such a thing as sin? How could anything other kids had done to him be bad? How could good and bad exist in a world without God, the ultimate authority, to decide such a thing? All the teasing and mocking and jeering and bullying—if there was no God, then where was the power to say they were wrong or bad?

And if there was no God, then there was no heaven, which meant that when he died . . . he would be gone. Completely. He didn't want to be gone. He didn't want to stop existing. He didn't want to become nothing. He liked being able to think and feel and experience. He did. Even though there were so many unpleasant things he had experienced so far, it wasn't enough to make him want to stop *being*. He wanted to *be*. If there was no heaven waiting for him after this, then his short life felt like a miserable joke. Human life itself was all a massive, miserable joke.

He didn't want this joke of a life to be all there was. He didn't *want* that. *He didn't want that!* It was too disgusting a thought! Unacceptable! What kind of a joke was it to live your young years confined by adults who didn't respect you? And then by the time you were old enough to have the right to independence, you were confined by your job, because you can't live well or for very long without money? And by the time you were old enough to retire from your job, your body was breaking down so much you couldn't even fully enjoy your freedom? There was no period when a person got to just live. Fun always came second to work if you were going to be an acceptable member of society. And even then, fun was mostly a luxury for people who could afford the expense and the time.

It was why his dad worked fifty and sixty hours a week at his utility contracting job and spent the rest of his time resting, usually watching TV. It wasn't just that the money wasn't enough to afford more time away from work, he was also so worn from the work that all he wanted to do with his time was catch up on sleep.

That was no way for anyone to live.

And if that was all his life was, if there was no eternal bliss coming, then what was even the point of going through any of it?

Cory received all of Vio's fears and anxieties in a bundle of vibrations. Xe sat with them for a while, feeling them, really feeling them, letting them take over so it felt like they were xir own. Vio deserved that. Not just as a way for Cory to make amends, but because he deserved to be understood. Everyone did. And here Ae was making it easy for xem. Cory would have to be a pretty shitty person to not take advantage of that, especially for a friend.

Cory was gentle when xe spoke again.

“Yeah, it's true, if this is all there is then that's pretty bleak. That means tons of people in all of history have died miserable, for no good reason, and that's pretty fucked up. But we just have to accept it. We have to accept that there's no meaning to any of this. We're born, we live, and we die with no purpose. And there's no meaning to any of the shit we go through. It's all just people being shitty to each other because they're greedy and selfish and cruel. Everyone knows it. It's no secret. People make movies and TV shows and books about it all the time. We know we're shit, but we don't change. *We could*. The world *could* be completely different, but not enough people want to make the change, or not enough people can agree what the right change is. And even if people can agree on an idea, getting them all to actually *do* something is hard.”

And *even then*, massive protests didn't lead to sudden or permanent changes. You could have a huge pride parade or a civil rights march, you could have a whole goddamn revolution, and there would still be more shit to deal with, more creative ways to decide the haves and have-nots. Always.

“So we're basically stuck, for the most part. And it sucks. But accepting that is better than deluding yourself into thinking there's a god out there who could do something about it and just doesn't. He just wants you to wait until you die for things to get better. We wouldn't accept that bullshit from a *real* dad, why should we accept it from something that's supposed to be the most powerful being in existence?”

Xe didn't say it with hot frustration this time. Xe said it invitingly, encouraging Vio to consider.

“And look, just because there's no god to say what is or isn't a sin doesn't mean we don't get to decide what we think is good or bad. Anyone who makes fun of you or looks down on you is shit. If anyone hurts you, they're shit. You don't need a god to tell you that. And that also means that if there's nothing on the other side of this life, if you're ever going to get justice or if anyone's going to get punished for shit they've done, it has to happen *here*, and sometimes you have to do it yourself.”

Not that Cory believed in resurrection, but *The Crow* was one of xir favorite movies for that very theme of justice and punishment. Xe felt satisfied every time xe watched Eric kill each of his targets, because the fuckers deserved it. The world needed more of that.

Cory's words didn't comfort Vio though, because they only made him think about how there was no way Vio could get his own justice. He wasn't strong like Cory, not physically and not in terms of will. He couldn't stand up for himself, he could only hold on to the hurt and process it through his own internal mechanisms—and through drawing. So what was life supposed to be for someone like him? Someone weak and vulnerable at the mercy of merciless bullies?

“*I'll* take care of it,” Cory answered when xe felt the questions strum through. Xe leaned forward with serious eyes. “I'll fight anyone who messes with you. We both will,” xe said, gesturing with xir head toward Ae. “And you know Zoe and Aki will too.”

//But,// he thought, looking back and forth between them before dropping his eyes down to the floor. //But you won't be with me forever, will you? You're going to graduate before me and move on and have a life without me. You're going to leave me behind. That's what happens. People move on when they grow up.//

“No.”

It was so strong Vio looked up. Cory was shaking xir head.

“We’re not fucking leaving you.”

Vio heard the words and the decisive tone, but he also felt their force in Cory’s aura as it pulsed with hot energy.

“You hear me? We’re not just gonna leave like you’re nothing. You’re not nothing. You matter to us. We wouldn’t just leave you. I don’t care what everyone else does, dropping friends for partners and careers or whatever. We’re not like that. I wouldn’t make a big decision that didn’t include you, ok? And I mean, come on, look at Aki and Zoe. They’ve been together for years, and they still care about you a *lot*. They make time for you and make sure you’re part of their lives. They’d never drop you just because they have each other. And we’re not going to drop you for anything either.”

Neither Cory nor Ae reached out to touch him. He knew a moment like this was when people liked to put their hands on someone’s shoulder or arm or hand. It was supposed to be a gesture of care and reassurance. Vio didn’t understand that. Being touched only made his whole body feel like TV static—at the beginning. It got worse the longer a touch lasted.

He felt relief and comfort just being with them, seeing the way they looked at him. He felt their sincerity and care in their auras, heavy and cozy like a pile of blankets bundled around him.

He believed them.

Like a gospel truth, he believed them.

They meant it. They wouldn’t leave him. They wouldn’t leave him to live this short joke of a life alone, and that made him so happy he started crying.

Remembering that feeling now made his blanket feel bigger, like a whole warm world. He sunk into it, his body melting into waves that spread to the farthest reaches of that world. No one could touch him. How safe, how free, how wonderful. He was ocean waves, sound waves, radio waves, light waves. He filled his world to the brim with himself.

But the others were there too—as parts of himself.

Ae, Cory, Aki, Zoe, there were traces of them in his waves. They formed part of his song now.

He didn't know if he could remove the trace of God that was there too. That belief had been grafted into him so thoroughly that even if he didn't want to believe anymore, there would probably always be some indelible trace of it. But even if his doubt and his will weren't enough to undo the work his family and church had done, he was glad he could graft a belief in his friends right there along with it.

## CHAPTER 5

Zoe's bed was so comfortable.

Of course, a lot of that had to do with being snuggled up against her, but the bed itself was nice too. It was big enough that as Aki lay on her side, her back pulled in close against Zoe's front, there was still enough room for one more person on either side of them. Aki exhaled quietly through her nose and scooted in even closer against Zoe while taking hold of Zoe's hand. She loved the feeling of Zoe's arm draped across her side and her breath in her hair. Beautiful quiet like this complemented the lively *loud* in the bars and dance clubs.

Aki kept her eyes closed and just focused on soaking it all in. The still air. Zoe's skin, body, breath. Her own heart. Their heat collected cozily in the blankets—though that was mostly Zoe. She generated a lot of body heat, which made her a fantastic partner in the cold weather. Snow here may have been rare, but the temperatures could still drop into the thirties and twenties, even when it was dry and sunny.

At times like this, Aki didn't mind that she couldn't bring Zoe home. Aki still lived with her parents, and she was pretty sure they wouldn't be all that thrilled by the reveal. Rather than risk finding out her parents were in fact as homophobic and racist as she feared, she just kept putting it off so that she could daydream about the first meeting going well.

*"Mom, dad, this is my girlfriend, Zoe."*

*"Hooo, your girlfriend? That's wonderful, how nice to meet you!"*

*"How long have you known each other?"*

*"Well, we've been together since junior year—of high school, I mean."*

*"High school! Such a long time! You must be very good for each other."*

*"We are. We really are."*

*"Well come, sit down, tell us more! We want to know all about you, Zoe."*

It was such a nice dream, and as long as she didn't do anything, a part of her could believe in it, believe that that was the scene waiting for her in the future.

*"We just want you to be happy,"* her dream mother would say. Even hearing that just in her imagination made her lungs lock as a fist formed in her chest.

For seven years now, Aki had been keeping her relationship with Zoe hidden from her parents, and wrestling with the guilt over her cowardice. But Zoe never begrudged her. She always pulled Aki into a comforting bear hug and told her it was ok.

"You don't have to tell them for me," Zoe said once while caressing Aki's cheek. They were lying on Zoe's bed, looking into each other's eyes. "They're *your* parents. You should tell them for yourself, when you're ready." Aki wiped the anxious tears from her eyes and sniffled. Then Zoe smiled and added with playful truth, "And you know if they kick you out, you can just move in here. So you'll be good." She wiped a fresh tear from Aki's cheek with her thumb as Aki giggled through a sob. "Ok? I'm here for you."

That conversation had ended with Aki nodding and burying her pink face in Zoe's shoulder while Zoe rubbed Aki's back for half an hour. They had had many conversations on Zoe's bed. Aki had been over to Zoe's house so many times since they got together that after they graduated high school, Zoe's mom had said, "I guess it's time to make you a key for the house."

Aki blinked, startled.

"What? Why?"

With a big smile, Zoe's mom answered, "College can be a crazy time, and if you're going to be coming over at two in the morning, I'd rather you just come on in than wake *us* up."

Aki couldn't really think of a reason why she would be showing up alone to their house at two in the morning, but that didn't matter. That wasn't the point. Already now, when she

showed up with Zoe, Mrs. Allen would greet her like a full-fledged daughter and ask if she needed anything to eat. She and her husband had created a house of unbridled welcome and warmth. Yet, there was always that knowledge in the back of Aki's head that really, she was a visitor. The key offer—no, not an offer, Mrs. Allen hadn't *asked* if she *wanted* one, she simply said it was time Aki had one. The key, being given a key of her own, would mean she wasn't just a visitor. Maybe she never had been.

In that moment, Aki hadn't been able to say anything. Her throat was too tight, so she just let the matter drop with some smiles. But a few days later, she had a brand new key looped with the rest on her ring.

A key to home.

She had been born into one home, and welcomed whole-heartedly into another.

Aki squeezed Zoe's hand as she smiled a trembling smile to the dark. Tears rose up under her closed eyelids, and a few drops slid out, but she didn't take her hand off Zoe's.

Zoe's hands.

Oh, Zoe had fantastic hands.

The two of them had had a fairly quiet evening. They had taken their time while out at dinner, enjoying the warm atmosphere of a small Vietnamese restaurant. The lights gave the space an orange glow and no one there was in a rush. They were able to just sit for a while, talking and eating and relaxing, until they felt ready to move on. And rather than make any stops, they had decided to come straight home. Zoe's parents were already in their own room when they came in, and though Mrs. Allen had an almost supernatural sense to know when they came through the door—it probably had something to do with Zoe's little brother Lucas, who was a bit more of a handful to keep track of—Zoe and Aki made their way gently up the stairs to make as little disturbance as possible.

Zoe closed her bedroom door with practiced silence, then met Aki on her bed and began rubbing her shoulders from behind. A few warm kisses to the back of Aki's neck sunk down to kindle her heart into a delightful buzz. Then Zoe asked close to Aki's ear, "You ready?"

Zoe's low voice made Aki's skin sing like chimes stirred by wind. She smiled and nodded.

"Yeah."

While Aki began undressing, Zoe took two pillows at the head of the bed and layered them together at the foot, then grabbed a thick sheet from her closet. As she lit a few candles she had distributed around her room, Aki piled her clothes neatly on the nightstand and then lay down with her chest on the slant of the top pillow. She breathed slowly to get herself comfortably settled in place, and then with the pleasant smell of match-smoke in her nose, Zoe flung open the sheet and let it fall on top of her. When it was flat, Zoe folded it down to Aki's waist and tucked it under her hips, leaving her bare back exposed.

And then Zoe began, working her hands through Aki's muscles. She started in the neck and shoulders, then down the upper arms and back, finding the strings and kneading them smoother and softer. Zoe pressed in with her fingers, palms, knuckles, stroking down the fibers to strip them of their tight knots.

As she worked, Zoe listened to Aki's body for its responses.

And not just with her fingers.

Zoe would know if Aki felt pain if she tensed up under her touch, which was a sense any masseuse should have. But more than that, Zoe could hear Aki's pleasure. Sometimes it was a sigh or a moan Aki released when a stroke went to a particularly deep place in some layer of her body between tangible and intangible. Aki had been studying anatomy for years, but what

opened up inside her when Zoe's touch hit just right, she didn't have a name for it. But name or no name, Zoe could feel it when Aki's soul shivered with a chord of bliss.

Zoe couldn't express her gratitude to Ae enough for that new sense. She could know a part of Aki directly that before had only been a kind of vague, spiritual awareness. Aki's mere presence had always felt like something, like it gave off a vibe that resonated with Zoe's own. No matter what they were doing, even just sitting in the same room quietly engaged in their own thing, they could feel each other's presence like a gentle hum in their chest that lifted their mood.

Now they knew what it was. How *real* it was.

Zoe could see Aki's soul shimmer under her skin, see it sparkle with stimulation, feel it vibrate against her own, hear its music through her internal stereo system. Zoe wished she could have had access to this part of Aki a long time ago, but since she was lucky enough to have had this dimension unlocked for her at all, she had no reason to complain.

"All right, flip over," Zoe murmured, her voice as warm and soft as the candlelight. Aki didn't even open her eyes as she rolled from her front to her back, Zoe holding the sheet up for her. When she was settled again, Zoe brought it back down and pulled it up her chest and tucked it in her underarms. In that position, Zoe worked again on Aki's shoulders, working her fingers down Aki's neck and along her spine. Tears rose under Aki's eyelids. Not from pain—from an ache. Zoe's work went in deep and touched something that caused a slow-rolling sensation, like she was yearning terribly for *something*, but she couldn't say what.

And at the same time, it stirred up a feeling of such overwhelming happiness that she couldn't contain it, her body wasn't big enough, and the only method it had for releasing excess emotion was to produce tears.

Her soul had its own response as well, singing a symphony that fed Zoe encouragement to continue. Aki's happiness had always sparked happiness in Zoe, but now Aki's happiness

streamed right through her, unfiltered and overflowing. Zoe could have kept going forever like that—what else was she supposed to do with so much soul energy spurring her on? But a physical body didn't have the stamina that its soul did, and eventually Zoe's hands and arms began to feel the wear of several hours. She spread her hands across Aki's chest to her shoulders, slid them down her arms as she leaned down, and kissed Aki's forehead.

Aki smiled and sighed gently.

//You're amazing,// her soul murmured, since her body felt too liquefied to have firm control over her voice.

Zoe smiled and slowly climbed up onto the bed so she could plant her knees on either side of Aki and crouch over her for another kiss to her lips. Aki reached up with both hands and traced the shaved designs in the sides of Zoe's hair with her fingertips as she continued the kiss. Zoe pulled her up with an arm around her waist, and they worked together to keep the kiss going as they gradually, leisurely, made their way to the head of the bed, tossing the pillows back in place to wait for them. The candles played a flickering lightshow in the room, but their souls outshined them, bright as they were and full of stars, flashing with the notes of the song they made together.

Eventually they were able to get under the blankets, and Zoe pulled Aki in so she could kiss the back of her neck.

*Mmmh.* She sighed to herself and kissed more and more. Aki felt so good, smelled so good. A sweet compulsion kept bringing Zoe's lips back to Aki's skin, and a growing craving made her open her lips and taste Aki with her tongue and teeth. She was so soft, and her voice so invigorating, like an electric charge right to Zoe's heart.

Gaining access to Aki's soul hadn't decreased Zoe's interest in Aki's body. If anything, her interest increased, because now Zoe could feel not just Aki's physical reactions, but also the

corresponding sparkle of her delight. Zoe loved wrapping her arms around Aki's waist, kissing her neck, massaging her muscles, smelling her hair. She loved looking into Aki's dark eyes, picking her up, making her smile, watching her study, hearing her laugh, dancing with her, singing with her, *being* with her. There were just so many things to love, and Aki's soul hadn't replaced any of it.

Which was where they differed from Cory and Vio.

For those two, their bodies were a cage and Ae was the savior who could free them. Cory and Vio were eager to strip out of their flesh and become pure souls as Ae could. Zoe and Aki didn't feel that desperation. For them, their bodies weren't burdens, they were vehicles that allowed them to experience wonderful things, including each other. They embraced their bodies as part of them, part of their whole selves, their means of engaging with a world in which they felt a deep interest.

Which was another point of deviation.

Cory had rejected the world early on, seeing no reason to be part of it any more than absolutely necessary. Vio found the world too confusing and hostile for integration to seem possible. They were outsiders, and they built their lives in their own spaces on the outskirts. Aki and Zoe understood that, but for them, life was different. They were both connected to the world. They were *in* it, and they *wanted* to be in it. So their bodies were necessary. Without their bodies, they couldn't be part of their communities—of humanity. That wasn't a freeing thought for them. It was depressing.

Zoe breathed in deeply. Aki smelled like mint and coconut from all the lotion Zoe had massaged into her skin. As sublime as Aki's soul was, Zoe didn't want to lose the pleasure of feeling Aki's body against her own. There was just something uniquely, *sensually* delightful about it that was worth keeping in itself.

Even if it meant keeping the unpleasant things too. There were certainly plenty of bad things a body opened up access to, but Zoe didn't blame all bad experiences on just having a body. The root of some of the worst things was a society that failed to care for the wellbeing of its constituent bodies. Zoe knew all about it, thanks to her mother.

Efie Allen was a nurse. Had been for decades. She knew very well the kinds of ailments that could be inflicted on a body. Diseases of all kinds. Hunger. Neglect and abuse. Disdain and violence. From people close to you. Strangers. Faceless mechanisms. Bad luck and circumstance. And practically none of it was neutral. There was a much bigger picture when it came to how certain bodies experienced the world, and it wasn't pretty.

But as Efie would say, "How can you expect people to think about bigger important issues when they're always caught up with worrying about the basics?"

Poverty was like a disease, causing a proliferation of ugly symptoms that all needed immediate attention. From a young age, as far back as she could remember, Zoe had seen her mother care for and counsel people with all kinds of struggles: people sick from stress because they couldn't pay bills and couldn't afford to take time off from work to recover; people who couldn't sleep because they were hungry and who couldn't do well in school or at work because they were tired; women who stayed with their abusive husbands because he had their only roof and income; people who rationed their medication—when they could afford to get any at all.

Efie's work felt like Sisyphean labor sometimes, when she saw the same people over and over for the same reasons, always only able to do so much. Nothing she did for one person or one family could fix the root of everything, and she knew it. But she had to fill the holes that the system left in her community.

The holes weren't there because her people had been "forgotten" or "left behind" by the system. That was too generous. No, these holes were deliberate. The system had been designed

to actively keep certain people down and too occupied to protest. There was no forgetting here. If it was just a matter of forgetting, the problem would have been solved by calling the police or government agencies and reminding the arbiters of the system that they existed and needed help.

But that wasn't how it worked. No one needed to be reminded.

Given its purpose, the system wasn't a failure. It only failed if you believed it was supposed to be otherwise. Effe had seen too much to believe that, and Zoe didn't believe either. Effe had told her so many stories, and she had seen with her own eyes some of the people at the clinic. She had heard the conversations her mom had had over the phone late at night, loud voices on the other line wrenched with need, soft voices pleading for help.

No matter what kind of supernatural opportunity came to her, Zoe couldn't abandon them. Her mother had devoted time, energy, work, and heart to the people who came to her, and Zoe had known early on that she would do the same.

"So, what are *you* going to major in?"

A junior year conversation as Zoe and Aki lounged together on Zoe's bed. It had been a smaller one back then, before Zoe had bought a used queen size from a neighbor down the street.

"I'm thinking psychology," Zoe answered. "Then I'll go to grad school for therapy. Or something like that."

"Nice!"

"Yeah. Mom does all the nursing stuff, and she's great at that, but I don't know, I think I'm more wired for talking to people."

"I think you'd be a great therapist. You listen really well."

"Yeah," Zoe sighed with some hesitation. "But one thing that kinda makes me worry is like, I might end up getting some patients and the only thing I'll think to say to them is, 'Stop being such a goddamn idiot and grow the fuck up'."

Aki snorted and laughed toward the ceiling.

“Well I mean, there are definitely some people out there that need to be told that.”

“Heh, yeah. That’s why I think I need to make sure I can do both, you know? I need to be professional and cool when it’s appropriate, but then when someone’s just talking nonsense bullshit, I need to be real. I don’t think I’d be able to keep a *serious therapist* persona all the time,” she said mockingly while making scare quotes with her fingers. “I don’t think everyone’s gonna respond to that well anyway, and I don’t want to alienate people like that. I mean, that would pretty much defeat the purpose. I don’t want to get educated to look down on anyone, I want to get the credentials I need to get an official stamp of approval, and then I’ll do things my own way and get things done, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. And I know you’ll find a way that works. You feel people out really well. You can always figure out the right thing to say.”

Zoe smiled and rolled onto her side to look at Aki with her head propped up in one hand. She reached out her other hand to slide her fingers between Aki’s and curl them together.

“So what about you?”

“What am I going to major in?” Aki asked while squeezing Zoe’s fingers with her own. “Biology, pre-med track.”

Zoe smiled.

“Right. So you’re really going for it.”

Aki nodded.

“Yeah.” And then she smiled wryly. “It makes mom and dad happy. They get to tell everyone I’m doing something *really important*,” she said, mimicking Zoe’s sarcastic tone. “And I mean, I *am*. I mean, I think I am. I hope I get to. I just don’t know if I’ll ever be able to talk about it with them. You know, why I want to do this.”

Zoe rubbed the side of Aki's hand with her thumb.

"Well, maybe when you do find a cure for AIDS, they'll be open to hearing it."

Aki snickered.

"Right. Doing something that prestigious will finally be enough to outweigh any disappointment they might have about having a gay daughter."

"You *really* think they'd be disappointed in you for that?"

Aki gave Zoe a thoughtful look.

"Yeah, I do. They're pretty traditional. And not that every American parent is super open-minded or anything, but like, Japanese people tend to be pretty conservative about this kind of thing. I get the feeling my parents still have that expectation on me to get married and stay home to raise my kids when I have them. And I mean *when*, not *if*."

"Hm." Zoe eyed Aki closely for a moment, then asked, "Do you want kids?"

In the following pause, Aki pulled her lips in to wet them against her tongue.

"I don't know," she said to the ceiling. "I guess I think about it sometimes, but, it never seems real. It always feels like I'm looking at someone else's life, not my own. So I don't know. Maybe at some point in the future I'll have stronger feelings about it, but right now . . . it's not something I feel like I really need. And it may never be, but I just don't know."

"Well you don't have to know. Frankly I get pretty concerned when girls in high school are already looking forward to being moms. It's like, *slow down*, you know?"

Aki laughed.

"Yeah. What about you though?"

"Me? With kids?" She shrugged her upper shoulder. "Eh, I don't know. I think I'm like you. Maybe later when I'm older, and I've had some time to live and do my own thing for a while, when I have myself figured out a bit more and I feel like I can really give a kid what they

need. But I don't know. It's not something I fantasize about or something I'm just like, oh man, I can't *wait* to have kids! You know?"

"Yeah."

Then Zoe grinned.

"I think we'd be really cool moms though."

Aki grinned back.

"Like, together?"

Zoe pulled her fingers from Aki's so she could smack the back of her hand against Aki's forehead.

"*Yeah* together! *Obviously!* I mean, we'd be cool no matter what, but *especially* together."

"I was just *checking*."

With a laugh, Zoe rolled over until she had Aki's lips under hers and pushed a hand up Aki's neck and into her hair.

"I can't believe the brilliant doctor needs to check something like *that*."

"Shut up," Aki said, flicking her finger against Zoe's forehead before pulling her into another kiss to keep her quiet.

College went basically as planned for Aki, earning her BS and getting accepted into the Biomedical Sciences program at the same university (a convenience she was grateful for). Zoe's path hadn't been quite so straightforward. She did get her BS in psychology—and a minor in sociology—with a sprinkling of other classes that amounted to nothing on paper but to a lot in her own mind. It was during that time that she got her job at Mike's. And then she finished her master's program, only to realize that things weren't really going to go as she had envisioned.

Mostly because the office where she had been able to get a position to do her supervised hours didn't get the kinds of clients she had been aiming to work with. She still gave her all. She listened and cared and provided the feedback that seemed best for each situation. But these weren't people she recognized from her own neighborhood, people like those her mom helped. And she realized that the problem was that the people she had been aiming to help weren't thinking about seeking therapy. They had more urgent needs to attend to.

Because of course they did. They always did.

So if Zoe was going to reach them, it was going to take a while. Once she finished her supervision and got her license, then she could set up her own practice right in the center of the community, maybe even in the same clinic as her mom. Reach people who might not know they needed it.

"You know, it's a good thing you're going into a more lucrative career," Zoe said to Aki, only half-joking. Probably less than half. "You can make enough to support both of us while I'm giving away therapy sessions and doing interventions for free."

Aki replied with another only-barely-joking smirk.

"And we'll save money by living with your parents."

Zoe nodded, "For sure."

It was a plan that gave them a measure of peace and confidence as they looked ahead to their future.

But in the meantime, Zoe was also just waiting for the moment when she would have to intervene into Vio's family.

The three of them had met near the start of the school year, 1994. He had started visiting the university library after school then. It was easy to get to for a kid who couldn't drive, since

the high school was only a couple blocks away, and it was an after-school activity his mother could approve of—as long as he came home before curfew.

Zoe was at the office, so Aki was alone at a large wooden table with a textbook laid open and a notebook folded to a page full of notes. She was scrawling new ones fast, her eyes bouncing from book to notes as she copied down terms and definitions into bullet points. She was so busy she didn't even notice there was someone standing behind her, looking over her shoulder. Not until she raised her arms up to stretch and then pushed them backwards as she rolled her spine over the top of her chair. Her hands knocked into something and she quickly swiveled around to find Vio standing there, looking young and terrified.

“Sorry! Sorry!” he said quickly with his hands up. He suddenly looked like he had been caught trespassing by a whole squad of police cars.

“It's fine, you're fine,” Aki said, holding out a reassuring hand. But Vio dodged it with twitchy movements, and when he realized what he had done, he began hugging himself and folding his shoulders forward to become smaller.

“Sorry. I'm sorry,” he said again, this time in a voice quiet with shame.

Aki stood up and approached him gently.

“Hey, come on, it's ok.”

But when she put her hand on his shoulder, he instinctively flinched to get away. He grimaced and shook his head.

“Sorry,” he said, looking agonized.

“No, I'm sorry,” Aki said quietly. She could tell some people were looking up at them, but she was less concerned about interrupting their studying than she was about this kid's condition. She leaned forward and asked with the care of divulging a secret, “Do you not like being touched?”

Vio looked at her—he had to look down since he was an inch or so taller—with bewilderment. And Aki instantly knew no one had ever asked him that before.

After a moment in which he didn't say anything, she said, "You don't, do you."

Vio finally shook his head with shallow, rapid movements.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

"No, no," Aki responded quickly. "I'm sorry. Are you ok? Do you want to sit down? Here. Come here. Sit down."

She pulled out the heavy wooden chair next to hers and gestured to it, inviting him in with heartfelt welcome. Vio hugged his own waist tighter and bit his bottom lip. When Aki didn't rescind her offer even with his hesitation, he looked around the library nervously, and then took tentative, awkward steps forward until he was standing next to the table. Aki made sure not to touch him as she pulled her textbook out of his space, giving him room to lay his backpack down. He slowly slid his backpack off his shoulders, looking like he expected that at any moment, the entire population of the large room would jump up and reveal that this whole thing was a prank, and that Aki would push the chair off its legs and laugh at him for being such a moron as to believe anyone would be nice to him.

But no one did. In fact, no one seemed to be looking at him anymore. Everyone he saw went back to huddling over their books, filling the room with a heavy air of concentration. He set his backpack on the table. Still nothing. Then with one more look around, he slowly sat down.

"There you go," Aki said softly as she too sat down. Vio set his arms down, wrapped around his backpack as he leaned forward and picked at the fabric nervously. He was already feeling fidgety in his seat when Aki asked, "What's your name?"

He looked at her and felt his insides shaking. He set his teeth against his bottom lip, at first looking like he might just be biting it again, but then he attempted to make a sound. It didn't

come out right at first, in part because he was still deciding in his mind what to say. Should he give his legal name? Or his real name? Just a first name, or a full name? He was so startled being put on the spot that he didn't know.

And since he was too nervous to produce many words, he chose the name with the least syllables.

“V-Vio.”

“Vio?”

He nodded to confirm.

“Nice to meek you Vio. I'm Aki. Are you a first year?”

He huddled closer to his backpack.

“Not here. In high school.”

“Oh, I see. What brings you here?”

It wasn't an interrogation, just curiosity, but it still made Vio's muscles coil up tightly.

“I. Just. Like it here,” he managed to get out.

“Ahhh, I get that. It's nice here,” she agreed. “So you come here after school?”

Vio nodded.

“Do you have homework to work on?”

Vio gripped the loose fabric of his backpack and chewed the inside of his cheeks.

“Yeah. But . . .”

He didn't finish his sentence, so Aki just let it hang.

“Well, don't let me distract you. You do your thing and I'll do mine, ok? And you can sit there as long as you want, or you can move somewhere else. Whatever works for you. Ok?”

Vio looked at her silently for a moment, then nodded.

“Ok,” Aki said with a smile, then adjusted the angle of her textbook and picked up where she left off in her notes. Next to her, Vio waited a minute, sitting tight with hesitation, and then finally grabbed one of the zippers on his backpack, and slowly, agonizingly slowly, pulled the zipper along its tracks, attempting to make as little noise as possible. Aki didn’t react. He kept looking up and around to see if anyone else did, but all eyes stayed down at the work in front of them.

When there was enough of an opening, Vio reached in and pulled out a sketchbook, a canvas pencil bag, and then a thick book from the library. He opened the book to a page bookmarked with a ripped piece of paper, revealing diagrams of the human gastrointestinal tract. Vio held the book open using the backpack as a weight on one of the corners, and then peeled open his pencil bag with the same anxious creeping as before until he could reach in with two fingers and extract a pencil. He set the sketchbook in his lap and curled over it to continue a sketch already in progress.

As Aki read and jotted down important notes and summaries, moving side to side from printed to pen-inked page, Vio worked intently on the page in his lap, occasionally looking up to memorize a detail from the images in the book before looking back down to replicate it. They each found a rhythm and kept to it for an hour until Aki reached up and back to stretch again. From her new angle she noticed how curled over Vio was in his seat and couldn’t help being curious. She leaned in his direction until her head was near the edge of the table.

Vio didn’t seem to notice her looking right at him. His eyes were locked downward, even when she peaked up and over his arm. Through the window, she caught a glimpse of a rather gruesome creation in the midst of being born in graphite. Vio’s pencil was poring over a rope of large intestines spilling over a gnarly hand with chipped nails. Aside from being unexpected, the

detail of it impressed her. It had the quality of a renaissance sketch, so vividly realistic and full-bodied from light and shading that it seemed to be coming out of the page.

“What are you working on?” Aki asked with a hushed voice.

Vio didn't respond, so Aki assumed he hadn't heard her. She reached out tentatively, but then stopped as she wondered if she should even interrupt him at all since he seemed so deep in his zone. She tried one more time.

“Vio?”

Still nothing. Just utter focus, like he was in another world where her voice couldn't reach. Fascinating. She watched him for a minute, just admiring his intensity. She had a study mode too, one she could dial into and maintain for hours, but this was another level.

And then he looked up to consider the textbook again, and she took the opportunity. She put her hand on the book, hoping that that would be able to get his attention.

It did.

He stared and furrowed his brow, as if he was having trouble processing why he couldn't see the image he was looking for. And then his mind plugged back into the present world and he blinked a few times, then followed the line from her hand, up her arm, and to her eyes.

“Hey,” she said with a smile, like she was welcoming him back from a trip. “Sorry to interrupt. I just was curious what you're working on.”

He stared at her, and she didn't know at first if he still hadn't heard her or if he just didn't understand the question. It took a few extra seconds, but then there was finally comprehension in his eyes, and what quickly followed was an anxious withdrawal.

“Um,” he said with a tremble in his voice.

Aki moved quickly to reassure him.

“I didn’t mean to make you nervous. You don’t have to tell me. I just thought it looked really good, from what I saw.”

His eyes went wide for a second and his body visibly tense.

Aki raised a hand between them.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pried. I’m making you nervous,” she said, making sure to keep her voice low enough that it stayed between the two of them. “But I mean it, you know. You’re really good.”

His hands started fidgeting like they were seeking something comforting in the awkward self-consciousness. Aki noticed it and took a chance. “Hey, look at this,” she said before she reached down to her own backpack on the floor and clipped something off one of the zippers. When she came back up, she held out to him a hand-sized stuffed animal. “I got it in Japan. Do you know Hello Kitty? She’s really popular over there. Feel her, she’s really soft.”

Vio looked hesitant, but when Aki made an insisting gesture, Vio slowly reached out and ran his fingertip down the white cartoon cat’s body.

“You can take it if you want,” she offered.

Vio made another hesitant look, but after swallowing, he reached out again and took the plush, carefully avoiding contact with her fingers. When he had it in both hands, he began massaging it with his thumbs. And he kept going. For a whole minute he just stared at the plush and rubbed it rhythmically. Relief made Aki’s chest feel warm.

Then Vio glanced at her nervously.

“Thank you,” he mumbled.

“No problem.”

Vio looked back down as he kept rubbing the soft fabric. Aki thought that would be the end of it, but just as she was about to return to her studying, Vio asked, “You saw what I’m drawing?”

“Yeah,” she said apologetically. “I got curious so I looked. I’m sorry.”

“You . . . think it’s good?”

She leaned forward emphatically.

“I think it’s great! Would you mind? Can I see it? I’d really like to see the whole thing.”

Vio bit his lips and squeezed the plush with both hands. But then he transferred it to his left hand and slowly handed over his sketchbook with the right. Aki took it reverently and held it up at an angle, standing it on her thighs and leaning it back toward the table.

“Wow,” she breathed. “This is amazing.”

Vio was squeezing the plush with both hands again, pouring all his anxiety into Hello Kitty’s small cotton body. She glanced at him, but the force of his anxiety prevented him from lifting his eyes any higher than their legs.

After exploring the drawing for a while—peering in closely at various parts, seeing the textures of the lines and then pulling out again to see the full image they all came together to make, feeling something magical in the way one hand wielding one pencil could summon a living soul such as this with simple strokes, forming a body ripped open and a face contorted in such tangible anguish—she asked, “How did you learn to draw so well?”

He looked up at her and quickly dropped his eyes back down to the image. With it exposed, he seemed to be seeing it with different eyes. He didn’t appear to be the master of creation anymore. Now he seemed uncertain and timid.

“I just . . . draw,” he said with his chin tucked in. “I get an image in my head and I just . . . put it down.”

“Well, you do it *really well*. Are you going to be an artist when you’re out of school?”

“I . . . I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

He shuffled his shoulders, then under his breath he said, “No one likes what I draw.”

She looked at the page again.

“No,” she disagreed, shaking her head, “that’s not right. Plenty of people out there would love your work. I mean, first of all, you’ve got great skill, just technically speaking. Seriously, I feel like I’m looking at a photo. It’s that real. And second of all, you’ve obviously got a great imagination. Just *look* at this! You drew this and you were basing it off of a picture of actual human anatomy. You didn’t just copy this,” she said, pointing to the textbook diagram. “You *applied* it to make something else. That’s so impressive! Do you study anatomy?”

He shuffled a little more in his seat, but she could see the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips, even though he fought it by pulling them in nervously between his teeth.

“Yeah,” he answered, still rubbing his thumbs heavily against the plush. “I like coming here. There are a lot of books. On humans and animals. They have a lot of detail, so it’s really easy to see everything. It’s better than our library.”

“Yeah. It’s because we have to have books for biology students and nursing students and pre-med students and grad students.”

“Yeah,” Vio agreed vaguely.

“I just started my grad program, you know. I’m doing biomedical science.”

He nodded.

“I thought so. Or something like that.” He nodded to her textbook with a skeleton marked from top to bottom with dozens more labels than anything he had been taught with.

“I’ve got a test coming up later this week,” Aki moaned. “It’s a ridiculous class, we move so fast through *everything*. And it’s all stuff I have to actually remember. So I have to spend a lot of extra time studying to make sure everything sticks. Permanently. And if I write everything down myself, that usually helps more than just reading it in the book.” She tapped her notebook, which did seem to contain all the same information as the text, just with minor changes in arrangement.

“Mm,” was all Vio could think to say.

“If you like anatomy, you could always study with me, if you want. You can look at my books too. They’ve definitely got lots of pictures—of everything.”

Vio continued rubbing the plush, but he finally allowed a smile to appear.

“Thank you.”

She handed the sketchbook back, sliding it sideways over his thigh, and when he saw it enter his small field of vision, he took it with one hand while gripping the plush tightly in the other.

“Any time. Really.”

He cast a quick glance up, just enough to see her smile, and then looked back down to the drawing. He was too overwhelmed to speak, and he worried that even if he could manage to get something out, his voice would be uncontrollably loud. So he just kept squeezing.

When Aki realized he wasn’t going to say anything, she said, “Well, sorry to interrupt. I’ll let you get back to it. But it was nice talking to you, Vio.”

She made sure to say his name. She wanted him to know how intentional she was in speaking to him.

Vio trembled a little bit, caught in an awkward moment of not knowing what to say, so he gave “Thank you” a try and then instantly bit the inside of his cheeks, wondering if that had been

the wrong thing, if in this context it made him sound stupid. He didn't know, but it felt like it, and the jolt of that made him squeeze the plush tight with both hands.

“Do you mind, will you show it to me again before you leave?”

Vio dug his nails into Hello Kitty's back and then nodded.

“Awesome! Thanks, I'm excited!”

Vio bit harder on his cheeks, but he was struggling, because part of him wanted to smile. It was a tangled mix in his chest of self-consciousness, anxiety, fear, hope, and pride. After a moment, Aki went back to her reading and copying. Vio then set the plush on his backpack, picked up his pencil, and resumed his work, a strange tingly feeling filling his body.

A few more hours passed, and then Aki closed her textbook. After a sigh she closed her notebook and slid it into her backpack.

“Hey, Vio?” she asked, and she reached over and gently tapped the edge of his sketchbook. He noticed and looked up. “Hey. I just wanted to say bye. I'm about to go get some dinner.”

He looked confused.

“What time is it?”

“About six-thirty.”

“Oh.” He looked up to the clock on the far wall to confirm that she was correct. “I should go too.” He looked down at his sketchbook and hesitated to close it. He remembered what she had said, but he didn't want to just push it on her. What if she hadn't really meant it?

But Aki then asked, “Can I see?”

Vio slowly—but not as hesitantly as before—offered her the sketchbook. She took it and saw that he had already started another picture. It was still in an early phase, but she could see something manifesting in the shadows of shapes and lines. She turned the page back to see the

earlier creature and found it even darker than before, the heavy shading casting the lone figure in a desolate atmosphere as it suffered from its mutilation.

“This is really powerful,” she said. “There’s so much feeling here. Not just in the face, in everything. The dark is so heavy, just . . . wow.” She handed the book back. “Thank you. I’m really impressed. Really.”

He took it and gently folded it closed.

“Thank you.”

“Hey,” she said as he slid it carefully into his backpack. “Do you need a ride? I’m not in a hurry. I can drop you off somewhere.”

“Um . . .”

“I mean, if you want. It’s fine if you don’t, I just thought I’d offer.”

“Um . . . I’m just going home . . . It’s not that far.”

“Ok. It’s seriously up to you. No pressure either way.”

“Um . . .” He couldn’t tell if the energized tingling was a good feeling or bad, but in any case, it gave him a sudden burst of courage. Or at least just enough to say, “. . . Ok.”

Aki asked, “Yeah?”

And feeling a flurry inside his chest, Vio nodded.

“Ok. Well let’s go then.” She gave him an encouraging smile, and then led him out to the parking lot. He followed with his hands clinging to his shoulder straps and his eyes jumping from one thing to another, anything that just happened to catch his attention. Aki stopped at a silver 80s model Accord and opened the passenger door to let him in. He was scared, he had to admit. It felt like this could all be a ruse to kidnap him. Part of him thought that was much more likely than a graduate student genuinely being nice to him. But if she *was* being genuine, then

backing out now would be rude, and he would feel stupid and guilty for that for a long, long time.

So he decided to take the risk.

He sat down, hugging his backpack close, and Aki closed the door for him before getting into the front.

“Ok, just tell me where to go.”

She started the car and Vio gave her the directions she needed. He kept expecting that at some point she would turn in the opposite direction or drive right by the street he pointed to. But she followed every signal he gave, and in just under three miles Aki was sliding right along the curb in front of his house.

“Here?” she asked when she came to a stop.

He nodded.

“All right. Well, it was really nice meeting you, Vio.”

He nodded again.

“Nice to meet you too.”

“I hope I see you again sometime in the library. You can sit next to me any time you want. And I’d love to see any more drawings you do, if you feel like sharing.”

The Hello Kitty plush was in his hand—had been the whole ride—and he squeezed it hard.

“Ok.” He looked out the window to his house, and with as nervous as he was, he would have preferred to stay in the car. But part of him was also ready to calm down from all the jitters running through his body. So maybe home wouldn’t be so bad. He opened the door and got out.

“Thank you,” he said stiffly into the car without looking in her eyes. “Good night.”

“Yeah, good night. See you later!”

She waved to him and he waved back—awkwardly, he was sure—and then closed the door.

Aki watched until he opened the front door and went inside, and she didn't at all mind that the plush was now clipped onto his backpack. She had said *take* it, after all. If he had interpreted that to mean permanently, she wasn't going to fight to get it back. Especially if he actually wanted it. And it seemed like he could use it too, more than she needed it.

Two weeks later, Vio met Zoe.

By that time, Vio had gotten more comfortable sitting next to Aki and getting rides home from her. Then Thursday afternoon, Zoe came to the library, surprising Aki by coming up behind her and covering her eyes with her hands. Aki grinned and leaned her head back, and Zoe grabbed the sides of her head before planting an upside-down kiss on her lips.

“What are you doing here?” Aki asked with an excited whisper.

“Dr. Hanigan had some kind of family emergency and cancelled class.” Zoe rubbed her hand along Aki's shoulder as she shifted her eyes to Aki's left. “So, is this him?”

Vio sat still in his chair while looking back and forth between Aki and Zoe.

“Yup,” Aki answered. “Vio, this is Zoe. Zoe, Vio.”

Zoe greeted him with a light wave.

“I'd shake your hand, but I hear you don't like being touched.”

Vio shook his head.

“Not really.”

“All right then.” She glanced down to the sketchbook—he had it on the table this time.

“So, you working on something? I hear you're an artist, too.”

“Um . . .”

He looked down to his sketchbook nervously.

“Trust me, she’ll love it,” Aki said reassuringly.

Vio scraped his bottom lip with his teeth then shyly handed the sketchbook over. Zoe took it and Vio scrunched up his shoulders as she looked over the page.

“*Damn,*” she said, deliberately restraining her voice down to an acceptable library volume. She scrutinized the work with enthusiasm, bringing it closer to her face and then holding it back again a few times over. Then she looked down at Vio. “You *drew* this?”

Vio nodded, feeling that same jittery feeling as before—the rumble of nervousness and anxiety, but with a different flavor to it. Something vaguely sugary-bright. It made his stomach tremble and his lips flutter at the corners.

He nodded.

“*Damn,*” she said again, shaking her head. “That’s really something. Have you seen this?” she asked Aki.

“Not yet.”

“Well here, *look* at this!”

She set the sketchbook down on the table between Aki’s and Vio’s spaces, revealing a mummified body whose skin had become a layer of thin shrink-wrap suctioned down tightly around the bones and shriveled tendons. They were easily visible, including the little things that weren’t quite right: the extra ribs, the too-long fingers, the too-big teeth. But the disproportions seemed deliberate, a stylization for effect rather than a lack of control over his subject.

Vio shifted in his seat, his insides vibrating as Aki looked at the drawing with her mouth set in a small o of wonder. He dug his nails so hard into his jeans he could feel them in his legs. And he realized through the thick sensation permeating his body that his heart was racing.

Then Zoe turned to him.

“You mind if I look at more of your stuff?”

Vio scraped his nails hard along his jeans, then shook his head.

“Is that a ‘No, don’t look,’ or a ‘No, I don’t mind’?” she asked.

He scraped his jeans again to keep his hands from shaking.

“No, I don’t mind,” he said in a small voice.

“Awesome. Hey, you want to go outside? I don’t want to keep talking in here with everyone else working. And it’s nice out there.”

“Sure,” Aki answered, then turned to Vio. “How about you?”

He looked from Aki to Zoe then back to Aki.

“Ok.”

“Ok,” Zoe said with a nod, and then she took Aki’s textbook for her off the table while Aki slid her notebook into her backpack. With Zoe still holding the sketchbook, Vio only had to pack his pencil bag before pulling his backpack onto his shoulders. They made their way outside and the three of them sat down on a short stone wall in the sunshine. Vio looked sideways across Aki to watch Zoe turn through more pages of his sketchbook. The whole time, fear dug its nails into his skull and shoulders, but there was also a competing fluttery sensation in his stomach as Zoe kept looking, making sounds like, “Ohhhh” and “Ooooo” and “Mmmm” and “Oh *damn*”.

He coped by squeezing and massaging the Hello Kitty plush still clipped to his backpack, which he had laid flat across his thighs. He liked the weight of it there. It was calming somehow.

Eventually Zoe flipped the sketchbook closed and handed it across Aki and back to Vio.

“Wow,” she said as Vio took it. “That’s some real good stuff in there.”

“Thank you.”

“How long have you been drawing?”

“Um . . . always, I guess?”

“Hm, makes sense. You’re great at it. Seriously. And you can only get better, right? Just imagine how amazing you’ll be in a few years. You could be famous someday.”

Vio shook his head.

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Nobody likes what I draw.”

“Excuse me? Are we nobody?” she asked with a jesting tone.

“I mean,” he amended with a wave of guilt splashing down his body, “no one *else* has ever liked what I draw. They always say it’s creepy.”

Zoe snorted.

“Ok, well first of all, those people are dumb. Second of all, they *are* creepy, but creepy is *awesome*. And third of all, have you studied art history? People have been making dark, creepy, disturbing art for *forever*. This isn’t anything unusual. You just haven’t been showing your work to the right people.”

Vio’s heart was pounding in his head now as well as his chest. He didn’t know what to say. But the sugary-bright feeling was getting brighter. He decided he liked it, but he didn’t know how to say it, or what the right thing to say to keep it going would be. So he squeezed the plush while feeling helplessly awkward, certain that they would both get annoyed at his inability to speak and finally just leave.

But after a moment of Vio’s emotional silence, Zoe asked, “So I was going to take Aki out to get smoothies. You wanna come?”

As Vio’s chest vibrated, Aki said, “Oooo, smoothies?”

“Yep. I’ve been craving one all day.”

“Now *I’m* craving one.”

“And that’s exactly why we’re going. How about you, Vio?”

Vio’s smile finally broke free and he nodded.

“All right, cool. Let’s go!”

That had been Zoe’s reaction. A few weeks later, Vio’s mother had been cleaning the house, and while cleaning Vio and Javier’s room, she had come across one of his sketchbooks. She was waiting for him when he got home.

“What *is* this?” she demanded, confronting him practically right as he walked through the door. “*What is* all this?”

Panic constricted his entire body and froze his mind in an empty state, rendering speech physically impossible.

“Answer me!”

He flinched and desperately sought any words he could push out.

“It’s . . . just . . .”

“Are you disturbed? Is this some kind of devil worship?”

“*No*,” he managed to say. He wasn’t disturbed—or at least, he didn’t *think* he was. “I just . . . like it.”

“You *like* it? Good Lord, Victor, no *wonder* you don’t have any friends! *Look* at this! This kind of thing is going to make people think you’re a *serial killer* or something! Oh! Do you kill animals? Do you have a collection of little corpses somewhere that you study for this?”

“What? *No!*”

“How can I believe you?”

“Why would you ask me a question if you won’t believe me?”

“Don’t talk to me like that! Why are you doing this? Why would you draw these horrible things?”

“I just *like* it,” he insisted, feeling tears make his eyes heavy. He missed Aki and Zoe so much. And they were probably still so close, still on his street, driving away. *Come back*, he begged with his heart. *Come back. Come back, please.* With those words loud inside his soul, he used his voice to say, “It’s *art!*”

“It is *not* art! It’s *scary!* Victor, you are *scaring* me with this!”

She waved the sketchbook so hard he worried she would bend it. He half expected her to throw it to the floor, stomp on it, crush it under her twisting heel, and then spit on it.

“You weren’t supposed to see it,” he mumbled.

“See! You *know* it’s scary!”

She waved it again in his face, and he shook his head.

“I know it’s scary to *you!* But it’s not to *me!* I *like* it!”

“Oh Lord, you *are* disturbed.”

He shook his head hard, but he couldn’t say any more, he just gripped his head with both hands and wished he could disappear.

“No *normal* person would draw these things! Why can’t you ever just be *normal?*”

He wanted to say what Zoe had said, that artists had been making disturbing art for forever. He wanted to point out that horror was a mainstream genre. He wanted to say that he knew people who liked his work and didn’t think he was creepy or scary because of it. But he couldn’t. He just couldn’t.

“I just don’t understand how you can be this way,” she continued. She looked at the sketchbook with her nose wrinkled in disgust. “This is wrong. This is all just . . . *wrong.* I can’t stand looking at it. It makes me *sick.* Are you listening to me? You’re *sick.*”

For the rest of the night, he *was* sick. He felt nauseous, his stomach churning and clenching while the rest of his body tingled with the usual sensation that made him want to strip

off his flesh and bones and leave all those nerves behind. He didn't know why he wasn't normal. He didn't know why he couldn't even figure out how to *pretend* to be normal. He was just stuck, and it wasn't fair.

The next day, he told Aki and Zoe what had happened, what all his mom had said.

Zoe furrowed her brow.

“What a goddamn *bitch*.”

Vio flinched, and he felt like he was supposed to disagree, but he couldn't.

“I mean, that's just fucked up. Grown women shouldn't be throwing fucking tantrums at their kids like that. What the fuck.”

Vio liked hearing her say that, but he didn't feel like he had the right to agree. He didn't know if his perspective was valid. For all he knew, maybe his mom was right. How could he know? He only knew how it made him feel. It needed to be someone else who could declare, objectively, that she was wrong.

“Yeah, don't listen to anything she says,” Aki agreed. Her words felt like how he imagined an arm around his shoulders was *supposed* to feel. “You deserve better than that. *Way* better. And you know what?” She looked at Zoe with pursed lips for a few seconds, then looked at Vio to declare, “*We'll* be your moms.”

Vio looked at Aki and blinked with a blank face.

“What?”

“Yeah,” Zoe agreed enthusiastically. “That's right. We'll adopt you.”

“But . . .” He looked at them with a scrunched brow. “You're not old enough to be my mom.”

“Oh,” Zoe said with a sly smile. “With that baby face of yours, you could pass for twelve.”

“But, that still wouldn’t make you old enough.”

She and Aki both laughed.

“Well we don’t mean *literally*,” Aki clarified. “Or *legally*. I mean like, Zoe and I, we’ll do everything your mom *should* be doing. We’ll tell you how awesome you are. We’ll gush over all your art. We’ll take care of anyone who talks down to you. We’ll make your favorite food for you, just because. We won’t give you hugs if you don’t want that, but we’ll let you know we care about you. We’ll be proud of you and make sure everyone knows it.”

Vio looked at each of them, and he felt a crushing weight in his chest. It hurt, but it didn’t feel bad. And the tightness in his throat and the tears in his eyes had a happy flavor to them. He looked down at his legs and ran his nails along the seam of his jeans.

“So . . . do you want me to call you mom?”

That made them both laugh again.

“I mean, not unless *you* want to,” Aki said. “We just want you to know we’re here for you. Ok?”

Vio ran his nails up and down the seams as he nodded and let out a smile.

So Vio was family.

And for the year-plus since then, Zoe had been itching to knock on Vio’s door and tell his mother to her face to stop treating her son like shit. But her rational side knew that wouldn’t be effective. Satisfying? Yes. But there were more important things than quick gratification. She had to think long-term for Vio’s sake. And for the time being, that meant making a place for him that felt safe, like how a home should feel.

She wanted to be able to do that for everyone who needed it. She wanted to be a protector and a provider. And now that her senses were expanded, she could feel people, read them, see them, really see them, and know what they needed, even if they didn’t know it themselves.

She could do that now, thanks to Ae.

At least for some people, however many people she, as one person, could reach. But there were so many more than that out there. And as much as she wanted to, Zoe couldn't fix the world alone.

But she wondered if Ae could.

She imagined it. What if . . . What if Ae did the same thing e had done to Zoe—and Aki and Vio and Cory—to even more people? To *everyone*? What if humans reading each other's souls became as natural as seeing their faces or hearing their voices? What if people could really, *really* know each other? Surely that would fix a lot of problems. Surely that would fix all the miscommunications that happened every day. Surely that would end violence and prejudice, because how could anyone hurt someone when they could truly understand them and see the fullness of their being?

Zoe wanted to believe that, but it also seemed too good to be true. She dreamed of ideals, but she wasn't naïve. Some people's ability to feel compassion and empathy were too broken, their egos too big. If such people could read the souls of others, they would probably only see vulnerabilities to exploit. It wasn't a perfect solution.

And, well, it wasn't like Ae was going to do it anyway. Zoe knew eir interest wasn't in changing the world. E was a visitor, a curious observer. Cory was the only reason e had engaged in the first place. Eir intentions here had nothing to do with ethics, it was all just personal interest.

It was frustrating.

Because maybe Ae could do more. More than just open people's senses to another dimension of their reality. Maybe. But they didn't know, because Ae wasn't interested in exploring it. E just wanted to look around like a tourist, sampling a little bit of everything until . .

. what? Their interest ran out? And then what happened after that? No one knew. But Earth wasn't Ae's home. Hell, this *universe* wasn't Ae's home. E wasn't invested in improving the place because e didn't have to live there. E didn't have to be there at all.

But Zoe did. All the people she knew did. And they deserved better.

She squeezed Aki's waist, thinking, as she breathed into her hair, that Aki deserved parents she could be comfortable being honest with. Vio deserved a mother who didn't belittle him. Cory deserved parents who didn't neglect em. And that was just the beginning of a very, very long list of people she could come up with that she herself knew—all of whom deserved better.

Thinking about that made it hard to fall asleep.

Her muscles were tired, but her mind was still working, trying to solve a thousand problems simultaneously.

Aki could tell. Her eyelids were too heavy to lift, but she was awake enough to feel all the wheels in Zoe's mind whirring and the wind they made sweeping against her soul.

"Hey," she murmured while rubbing the length of Zoe's arm. "You want to talk about it?"

Zoe sighed, causing Aki's hair to rustle against her face.

"I can't talk about it all. It's too much all at once."

Aki snickered.

"That's not what I asked."

Zoe laughed into Aki's hair.

"I know. I heard you."

"If you want to talk about any of it, I'm here."

"Yeah but for how long?" Zoe teased. "You sound like you're fading."

“I am, but I can stay up all night listening to you talk.” Aki rolled her head until her nose pointed to the ceiling, and with an eyes-closed smile she added, “I like your voice.”

Zoe nuzzled Aki’s cheek before settling down. Then she sighed again.

“I’m just thinking about Ae and kind of . . . I don’t know, wishing they’d do more. You know? We don’t even know what all they’re capable of, but, I feel like they’d be able to do *something*. I don’t know what, but, I don’t know, it’s just frustrating that they’re not even motivated to try anything. I mean, who knows, they could unlock the secret to world peace, and they’re just floating around peeking in on people’s souls and listening to music and playing around like this is all a fun field trip and like . . . I want them to want to do more. You know? I mean, I look around and I see a million things I want to do. I see people I want to help, people I want to smack some sense into, a whole *society* I want to set straight.”

Sexism, racism, classism, colonialism, queer-phobia, so many ills that needed to be cured. She sighed, and the air still smelled of candles as they melted closer and closer to the end of their lives.

“There’s just so much that needs fixing. But what does Ae see when they look at us? At people and the world? We’re just . . . something new and weird to them. Nothing to really get involved in. And that’s frustrating, you know? And since Ae’s not from here, I don’t really know how to tell them they should care about what’s going on here. I feel like they just should, you know? I mean, I feel that way about everybody, but . . . I don’t know. How do you convince someone to feel empathy if they don’t feel it naturally? And it’s just frustrating to see someone who can do something you want to get done not do it. You know?”

Aki sighed through her nose and nodded against the pillow.

“Yeah. I get that.” She set her hand on Zoe’s wrist and rubbed it gently with her thumb. “Maybe you should actually bring it up. Who knows? Maybe you can work some magic and get Ae to see things differently.”

Zoe snickered.

“You think I’m that good, huh?”

“Oh I think you’re amazing.”

Zoe grinned and shifted a little on the bed.

“I guess it’s worth a shot. The worst thing that can happen is that nothing changes.”

Though if that was how it turned out, Zoe would walk away disappointed and even more frustrated. But, when you came across something you couldn’t change, you had to move on and focus on the things you could. If Ae answered her with indifference, Zoe would just have to accept it and work even harder to accomplish whatever she herself could. Put what Ae had given her to as much use as she could.

“But,” she added after a moment’s thought. “If I can’t convince Ae of anything else, maybe I can get them to tell you everything they know about biology. You know, the things no one’s figured out yet. They can look at HIV and AIDS up close and tell you how it works, and then you’d be able to make a cure in no time.”

“Mmmm,” Aki hummed enthusiastically. “Yeah, I like the sound of that. I’d love to get a Nobel Prize in my twenties.”

“That would be pretty impressive.”

“It would. So you’re going to talk to Ae about it *tomorrow*, right?”

Zoe laughed and nudged Aki’s leg with her knee.

“Don’t rush me. I have to come with up the right thing to say.”

“Since when do you need a script?”

“Not a *script*. I just want to have a good handle on what I want to say so that I’m ready to say it in whatever way fits the moment. I can be flexible, I just want to be prepared and have all my points clear in my head.”

“All right, fair enough.”

“*Thank* you.”

Aki smiled and shook her head before rolling to her side and snuggling backwards into Zoe.

“I love you, you know that?”

Zoe hugged Aki tight and kissed her neck.

“Yeah. I love you too.”

Sleep didn’t come quickly after that—Zoe’s mind was still running. But at least it had more of a focus now. She couldn’t deny the convenience and satisfaction of being able to reach inside someone and read them, feel their songs, know their mind. But she felt a particular affinity for words. Every means of communication had its value. Hands. Face. Art. Words. Soul. She didn’t want to give up any of them. Sure, it would be easier to have Ae just lick a nebula tongue through her soul and see exactly what Zoe wanted from em, but she wanted to give her therapist method a try. It’s what she had spent years getting an education for, after all.

And, she thought with a smirk, if she could successfully communicate with a being from beyond the universe, there wasn’t a Nobel Prize prestigious enough to acknowledge her ability. Seemed like a goal worth aiming for.

## CHAPTER 6

Ten-thirty was early.

And not just for Cory. Plenty of cars rolled down the street with xem as people sought their entertainment. The lights were still on in all the shopping areas. The parking lots were full. The movie theater had lines of people under its front flashing-lightbulb-framed board. Cory drove past all of it, cruising down the freeway for miles until a familiar exit appeared and xe took it, and followed shrinking roads until xe drifted into the parking lot for a large green area. There was nothing to buy here, only playgrounds, grass, and covered seating for group events, which meant it emptied out most nights. The only other person they could see was someone with a flashlight taking their dog on a walk down the trail that passed around the far edge between the open space and the trees.

Cory shut off the car and got out, closing the door carefully to make as little noise as possible. Ae did eir part by stepping out through the closed door. Cory locked the car before stuffing xir keys into xir black denim pocket, and then they began making their way together to the nearest playground. Cory moved in a straight line, nodding xir head and singing one of the songs they had practiced, while Ae's steps had a fae-like air, the way e glided and spun in a curlicue path, head bobbing and hair swaying. It wasn't just Cory's voice e could hear. They both heard and felt so much more. Guitars, bass, drums, certainly, but the night was wide and the stars joined in, their singing far brighter than the haze of the city's pollution allowed their light to be.

And of course Cory and Ae were part of it too, spilling vibrations and rhythms into the harmony, as well as compulsively playing their own instruments, Cory xir voice and Ae eir body.

At a certain point, Ae suddenly took off in a sprint toward the swing set. Cory kept singing as xe watched em jump toward the frame, kick off from its leg to reach the top bar,

swing around like a gymnast once in a full rotation and then swivel on the next round until e was mounted on the top with the bar between eir legs.

Ae treated eir body and the world like a playground. In eir true form, e could do anything, move anywhere as easily as a breeze. There was no need to run or jump or use any effort at all to get from one place to another. But by creating a physical form, e was able to play within limits—whichever ones e chose in the moment—and that provided some interest. E wouldn't want to be *trapped* in those limits of course—fuck, that kind of restriction would be horribly frustrating—but in short bursts they were a source of entertainment.

Ae swung one leg over the bar to sit on it like a bench, rocking back and forth and swinging eir legs with eir head hung back, letting moonlight pour down in a shower over eir face and down eir rippling hair.

Cory arrived and took a seat in one of the swings and began pushing xemself back and forth slowly with xir feet, keeping them planted on the dense pool of wood chips. Xe grabbed the chains and leaned xir head back too. Xe wanted to see a blacker sky. Its current muddy color hung like an ugly curtain, making the sky seem too close and too small.

Cory watched Ae rock and swing eir legs past each other, eluding gravity enough that e never fell from eir precarious post. Only when Ae chose to fall backwards to hang from eir bent legs and then grab one of the swing chains to use as a guide did e come down to the ground. Ae landed so softly it didn't rustle any of the chips under eir boots. E stepped toward the first swing in the row, where Cory sat, and leaned eir body forward against the angled leg of the frame with eir hands folded under eir chin. E didn't say anything but watched Cory swing at a pace controlled by xir feet.

Cory breathed slow and deep, mind working but behind a veil that hid any articulate thought. Xe could feel the energy of xir unconscious, but what exactly that part of xem was thinking about, xe couldn't say.

After a few minutes xe stopped swinging and just extended xir legs forward, relaxed and straight, and leaned xir head sideways against the taut chain.

“I don't want to die,” xe sighed.

In a fluid motion, Ae glided from the pole to behind Cory so e could drape eir arms over xir shoulders and set eir cheek on the top of xir head.

“I don't want you to die either.”

Cory swallowed to clear the ache in xir throat—at least a little.

“This barely even feels like living. Dying at the end of whatever *this* is supposed to be . . . fuck,” xe hissed with a grimace.

Ae ran eir hands gently up and down Cory's chest.

“Yeah,” e agreed with a long breath. “Human existence is strange. I understand why there are so many stories about a kind of afterlife waiting for you. It's like part of you knows you're supposed to live longer than what your bodies allow. You just haven't figured out how to do it.”

“I *want* to.” Cory ground xir teeth. “God, I fucking want to. So much.”

Ae folded eir arms across Cory's chest and pressed eir forehead into the back of Cory's head.

“I want you to too.”

“What do I need to do? What am I missing still?”

“I don't know.” Ae's nebula spun gently around them, a colorful light display of fireworks caught in full bloom. “It seems like you should be able to separate already. But for some reason, it's like you're still in the egg and you haven't fully hatched yet.”

“Can you do anything?”

“Do anything?” Ae repeated.

“Yeah.” Cory turned xir head to try to look at Ae sideways with one eye. “I mean, I don’t know, can you like, get inside me and fix whatever’s wrong?” Xe thought about jiggling wires connecting two devices, unplugging and re-plugging them, rebooting a computer, adjusting antennae until the reception came back clear. Maybe there was a disconnect somewhere between xir body and soul and xe just needed someone to fiddle around until things magically began to work.

Ae was quiet for a moment, even as eir nebula stayed in motion, swirling with multiple spirals rubbing together at the edges.

“I don’t know,” e said again, though this time there was perplexity in eir tone. “Do you think that’s possible?”

Cory scrunched xir brow.

“What are you asking *me* for? You’re the one who should know, not me.”

“Is it normal to expect that one person can change someone else?”

Cory went still for a moment, then slowly pushed up from the swing so that Ae was able to follow xir cue and unwrap eir arms to give xem the freedom to rise. Xe turned around and looked at Ae while gripping one chain in each hand.

“Maybe not the way you’d change a machine or a computer program or something like that. It’s not that easy, at least not for us. I guess I thought since you can go deeper than anyone else that you’d be able to, I don’t know . . . do something.”

Ae stared, seeing xem through eir gold eyes while forgetting to humanize them more by blinking. Cory didn’t mind. Xe didn’t want em to be human, so all the little flaws in eir performance were comforting reminders that e was something better.

“I’ve never thought about trying to change anything.”

“But . . . what about with Vio?” Cory pointed out. “You can make him feel better. You relax him when he’s stressed out.”

“I’m not actually changing anything though. I’m just giving him a gentle touch. He feels my soul and his soul responds that way. It’s not what I’m doing, it’s what he is doing in response, naturally.”

Ae tried to choose words that made sense, and the struggle was part of the fun. E could always fall back to direct communication if eir attempts failed.

Cory ground xir teeth and looked down in frustration, breathing loudly and pulling down on the chains to work out some of the tension in xir shoulders. Despair and anger struggled for control in xir face. The pressure building in xir chest could come out as tears or a scream—or both—but xe didn’t know which it would be yet.

“I’m not used to the idea of making change,” Ae said softly. “Out there . . . there’s no reason to want change. Things are the way they are. No one wonders about other ways things *could* be.”

“That’s because everything’s *fine* out there.” Cory looked up to the sky. “You don’t need to change anything. Everyone’s free to do whatever they want and be who they are and no one has to struggle for anything and no one has to die. What’s there to change?” Xe huffed and rubbed xir eyes to clear the hot tears beginning to rise. “*Here* . . . There’s way too much that needs to change. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to get old and die here.” Xe looked at Ae earnestly. “What if I never get it? What if I never figure it out and I’m just stuck here the rest of my life?” Xe shook xir head, eyes squinted with more tears. “Are you . . .” Xe looked up and shook xir head again, then exhaled hard. “Are you going to stay with me that long? Watch me

get old? Watch me die and then just move on? *Fuck!*” Xe had to rub xir eyes again when a few tears slipped down xir cheeks. “I don’t want . . . I don’t want . . .”

Ae slid over the rubber swing seat and wrapped eir arms around Cory. As Cory did the same, gripping Ae tight with xir arms and burying xir eyes in the curve of Ae’s neck, xe felt all of Ae pulling in close to embrace xem.

“I won’t leave you.”

Ae ran eir fingers through Cory’s hair, and Cory was vaguely aware that xe could feel more than two hands on xir body. Not an important detail. The comfort they gave was what mattered. Xe only had two arms, but xe used them to hold Ae as tight as xe could.

“I don’t want to die,” xe said again, voice muffled between them. “I don’t want you to move on without me.”

Even with extra hands and a soul like warm ocean currents, Ae didn’t have much solace to offer. All e could say for sure was, “I don’t either.” But beyond that? E only had a feeling of grief when e thought about the future, about how it would feel to lose something for the very first time.

Ae wanted to avoid it, for both their sakes, if they could.

And maybe that meant e would actually have to consider the idea. The idea that Ae could, possibly, do something, produce an effect on something else with intent. E didn’t know how, it was still such an alien notion, but considering what was at stake, e had great motivation to try.

They stayed in the park for hours. The night opened wide with welcome for their mourning, and they held each other’s hand as they lay on their backs on the merry-go-round, Ae spinning it slowly with an outstretched limb pushing at the ground. Cory had xir head near the edge, and watching the opaque sky above spin, xe felt like the hand on a depressing clock counting all the seconds xe lost. Eventually it wouldn’t just be xir time that slipped away, xe

would too. Xir soul, unlike Ae's, would someday go still and quiet. Xir song would be over. Xir existence would just . . . end. Xe would be just another soundwave that finally lost its energy and faded out. The more xe thought about it, the more empty xe felt. All the anger and resentment and frustration gradually lost its fire and morphed into a deadweight sitting on xir chest.

This was it.

There was a whole sky up there, a universe, a beyond-universe, and xe had been unlucky enough to be born *here*. Xe couldn't cry about it anymore tonight. Xe was too heavy for that. All xe could do was lie there and stare up and feel the distance between xerself and the sky as a measure of hopelessness. Xe reached an arm as far up as it could go and spread xir hand open. Not even close. Every exhale made the weight sink deeper into xir chest.

Eventually it got cold enough that Cory was ready to move. Xe wasn't tired, this exhaustion wasn't a condition sleep could cure, but bed seemed like a reasonable place to be. Xe sat up, rubbed xir eyes, and then xe and Ae walked back to the car with arms twisted together and hands linked.

In the car, Cory leaned xir head back against the seat for a moment and sighed before starting the engine. Xe wasn't in a mood to listen to music or sing, so they rode all the way back to the house with the radio off. The car reverberated with xir own murky vibrations, which had few distractions to compete with since by that time the roads were mostly empty, except for a few stray cars here and there. When Cory shut off the engine, Ae disappeared from xir seat, and Cory went in through the door alone. Xe considered taking a hot shower, but xe knew it wouldn't soothe anything beneath the surface. It wouldn't be able to wash the weight away. So xe went straight to xir room and found Ae sitting on the bed with xir ankles crossed and arms wrapped around xir bent legs.

Cory mindlessly changed into fleece pants and a t-shirt and crawled into bed, curling up on xir side with arm bent under xir pillow to better support xir head, and pulled the blanket in tight around xem. When xe was settled in place, Ae slid fluidly across the bed so e could curl eir body against Cory's back and wrap an arm around xem.

Feeling em so close, Cory was torn. It was what xe wanted. Xe wanted Ae so much. But xe wouldn't be able to get enough of em, not in the time limit xe was given. And for now, that was all xe could think about. Xe wanted to enjoy the moment as it happened, really immerse in it completely, but the future kept taunting xem, waving a hand in xir face to remind xem

Hey, hey, *hey*, it's almost over. It's almost over, you know. Hear that? Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. Oh, getting closer, you're almost done. Oh I'm sorry, am I *distracting* you? My bad. Here, let me just . . . Oh *hey!* Did I tell you? You're that much closer to *dying*. Tick-tock!

Xe shut xir eyes tight and worked xir jaw. Even diving into their soulspace didn't seem like enough. One night there, no matter how stretched out it seemed, was still only a teasing taste of what should last forever. Xe wouldn't be able to enjoy what xe got, only miss what xe never would.

The weight was too heavy. Even if xe found the strength to shift from body to soul, the weight would probably still cling to xem and drag down all the music in xir soul to nothing but one long bass note. Any amplification of that would be too much. Anger, sorrow, pain, yes, amplify those things all the way. Those were productive. They had rhythms to mine from their energy. But this? Xe wanted to keep this feeling as small as possible, because even contained within xir small human body, it threatened to drown xem in an abyss so deep the surface was as far away as the sky.

Ae complied with that desire. E didn't bring their soulspace to xem, and e didn't offer any comforting words. E didn't even know how. E didn't know how to make promises about things e couldn't guarantee—a thing e had noticed humans did fairly easily.

*It'll be ok, I promise. We're going to get through this. We'll figure this out. I promise.*

Humans said these things even if they couldn't possibly know for sure that everything would be ok, or that they would find a solution. They didn't know, so how could such words be any comfort? Ae still didn't understand it, it just seemed mean and insensitive to treat substantial feelings on equal footing with empty words. Not something in which e wanted to participate.

And e knew Cory wasn't interested in such a thing either. That was why e just held onto xir small body with eir own and hoped that it wouldn't take long for the feeling to pass on its own.

\*

“Hey, what's your name?”

Smiling lightly, e said, “I don't have one.”

Curiosity turned into confused skepticism.

“Don't have one?”

“No.”

E could have explained why, but e didn't feel enough interest in the person to invest the effort. He took it as a hint and moved on, but the question stirred eir curiosity. At first, e hadn't planned on making a puppet, but after the first day of following Cory around as a shimmery specter only xe could sense, e decided to replicate the human experience. It was easy enough. E just had to morph parts of emself into the same subatomic waves that physical bodies had. That's all it all was, just waves that became matter as opposed to soul or light. E built an avatar based on options e had seen through Cory's eyes that appealed most, giving emself dark skin,

moonlight hair, long, lean limbs—while forgoing a number of parts that were unnecessary, most but not all of them internal.

And since a name had seemed unnecessary too, e hadn't bothered to come up with one. Who else would e ever know besides Cory? And since Cory didn't need one for em . . .

But now, e began to wonder. If e *was* going to have a name, what would it be?

The question whirled gently in eir mind while e sat, rocking and thumping eir feet to the beat Cory set with xir guitar. Some people were listening. Others weren't. It didn't matter either way. Cory was just experimenting still, getting a feel for what it was like to put xir music out there in the open. Xe hadn't decided for sure if it was satisfying or not, so tonight xe was out again, performing at a coffee house's open mic night. Xe had never heard of it before xe saw the flyer, and after tonight, xe may never come back.

After playing a few songs, xe packed up xir guitar and left without making eye contact with anyone. Xe still couldn't tell if the performance thing was worth it. What was xe even hoping it could do for xem? Maybe xe just wanted to be heard? To have some space where xe was allowed to express xemself openly and honestly? Maybe. Something like that. Xe wasn't sure. It was still so vague xe couldn't quite articulate it.

But even if xe didn't know what xe wanted, xe didn't hate doing it, so xe kept finding places to play at. Just to see. To see if anything changed, or sparked. But if not, if xe ended up just going back to playing in private, it wouldn't be a disappointing outcome.

“Someone asked me my name earlier.”

Cory blinked a few times, caught in surprise with one hand on the wheel and one on the key. Xe looked over as xir brain raced to catch up.

Name. Right.

“What did you say?”

Xir companion looked at xem straight and answered matter-of-factly.

“That I don’t have one.”

Obviously.

Cory snorted.

“And how did *that* go?”

“Fine. The person didn’t ask me any more questions, so I didn’t have any distractions after that. But. It did make me wonder.”

Cory was twisted to look at em now with xir arm laid atop the steering wheel.

“What?”

When the gold eyes looked at Cory, they flashed with an accompanying flurry of glittery interest in eir aureole.

“Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to come up with a name.”

Cory raised an eyebrow.

“Seriously?”

A noncommittal shrug.

“Does it seem strange to you?”

Cory gestured vaguely with xir hands.

“I mean, I just don’t know how you’d even come up with a name that fits you.”

“I don’t either. But is that the point? Don’t humans get their names from their parents, before they even know anything about the person they’re naming?”

“Yeah. But it wouldn’t be like that for you. You know exactly who you are.”

“True. But I also know there’s no word in your language that would encompass everything I am, so there’s no way a name would fit me perfectly. Just like there’s no name that would fit *you* perfectly.”

“So, you want to pick something random?”

“Not random. I was actually curious what you would pick for me. What’s something that sounds good to you?”

Cory exhaled through pursed lips and raised xir brows high.

“Wow, that’s . . .”

It felt like a lot of pressure. Names were supposed to be *you*. Small and incomplete as they were, they were supposed to have some kind of sacred power to them. They identified you, a shorthand for your whole self where all that fullness would be too much for a limited space. To ask someone else to come up with that piece of you . . . it felt deep.

But at the same time, knowing how futile it would be to come up with the perfect shorthand helped drain it of that sense of *sacred*. Whatever they chose wouldn’t be eir “true” name—that would always be the song eir soul sang. The name would just be a moveable piece in the game of words, just like eir physical form was a piece in the game of bodies.

Even so, xe couldn’t imagine calling em by a normal name. It had to be something unusual.

“Hmm.”

Xe drummed xir fingers on the wheel as xir mind started groping around through the language to find anything that felt good, scrolling through letters and phonemes and jumping into related words. Good sounds and good meanings didn’t always match up, and eventually xe decided keeping it simple and vague might work best. Rather than a lot of syllables, xe thought something minimal and provocative would work, something open-ended that suggested more beyond itself instead of an extended word that attempted to corral meaning within its letters.

“Well . . . what do you think of ‘Ae’?”

“Ae.”

A thoughtful sound. When e said it, it was close to what Cory had been aiming for in xir mind. An open and ongoing vowel that hinted at something more. It invoked in xir mind *aerial*, *Aeolian*, *aesthetics*. Beauty and freedom. A sigh of relief.

“Yeah. A-E.”

“Ae.”

Slower this time. Experimental. And then e looked at Cory again and smiled with approval.

“So it’s all right?”

“Yeah. I like it.”

“Ok.” Xe turned the key and the engine hummed to life. “You can always change your mind. It doesn’t have to be permanent or anything.”

“Ok.” Ae settled comfortably into eir seat, still smiling. “Ae,” e murmured to emself. And despite what xe said, xe felt a glow of pride at having come up with something e liked.

“What about you?” Ae asked. “Do you want to change your name?”

“Uhhh,” Cory said as xe looked over xir shoulder to pull out of the parking space. “Not really. It doesn’t really matter that much to me. I’m fine with what I’ve got.”

“I see.”

“I mean, my name doesn’t really feel like anything. I’m not attached to it, but I’ve never tried to think of anything better. It’s just . . . kind of there.” Xe shrugged before driving forward down the lane of spaces toward the exit.

“Mmm.”

Cory glanced at Ae. Then again.

“Why?”

Ae sat with eir legs pulled up and arms wrapped around. E looked at Cory, so their eyes met when xe glanced a third time.

“Why do I ask?” e clarified.

“Yeah.”

“I wanted to know.”

“Well . . .” Cory leaned forward over the wheel to get a better view of the oncoming traffic. “What do *you* think of my name?” When an opening appeared, xe pushed the car forward and crossed to the second lane before another car came rolling past.

“I like it.”

Cory checked xir mirrors, glancing at Ae again while looking to the farthest side-view.

“Yeah?” xe asked with a smile poking at the corner of xir lips.

“I like everything about you.”

Cory knew xe couldn’t hide anything from Ae, but smiling didn’t come easily to xem, so xe tried to suppress it. Somehow the smile made xem more self-conscious than Ae having free access to xir soul’s vibrations. It would have made xem even more self-conscious to try to say anything back, but fortunately, Ae didn’t say things like with the expectation of a response, so xe was allowed to let it hover unanswered.

Instead, xe turned on the radio, and recognizing the chorus of “Losing My Religion”, xe quickly joined in, feeling a stronger compatibility than usual with the upbeat tempo and twangy guitar.

\*

Cory didn’t wake up until after ten.

Ae, of course, never fell asleep, but since e had never gained the ability to feel boredom, e didn’t mind lying next to Cory for hours. E could tell when xir parents were up and wandering

around the house, but eir curiosity about them had waned significantly after the first taste e had gotten of them, so e stayed put in Cory's room. There wasn't much in terms of decoration in it since Cory didn't have any affiliations and wasn't enough of a fan of anything to put posters or art on the walls. Instead, the room was designed to prioritize the computer desk where xe worked on recordings. Guitar practice varied from the chair to the floor to the bed, depending on xir mood.

The lack of decorations didn't bother Ae. E didn't need external points of interest to stay occupied. To em, sitting still and immersing in emself was more than enough stimulation. But when Cory woke up, that was a welcome change. Xe was lying loosely on the opposite side xe had gone to sleep on and rolled onto xir back with a deep breath before opening xir eyes. Ae slowly moved to hold eir head over xirs with enough distance that eir hair didn't touch Cory's face. For a moment they just looked at each other quietly as Ae tasted xir mood with a nebula tongue.

"Hey," xe mumbled, grogginess making xir voice thick.

"Hey," e echoed. Xe was feeling better. Not that xe ever felt *good*, but xe had had least buoyed up some from last night's depths.

Xe groaned a sigh and rubbed xir eyes.

"I need a shower."

Ae spilled down to the foot of the bed to give xem room to slide out. Xe stretched and bent xir neck right and left before exhaling heavily and heading to the door. With Cory leaving, Ae let eir puppet drop flat on its back and refocused eir attention on emself.

Cory dragged down the hallway, and when xe passed the opening to the game room, an unexpected figure nearly bumping into xem made xem jump.

"*Fuck*," xe hissed, and as xir heart slowed down xe realized it was xir dad.

“Yeah, good morning to you too.”

Cory squinted up to xir dad’s face and then rubbed xir eyes again.

“Hey,” xe muttered with absolutely no enthusiasm. “What’s up?”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“Jesus Christ,” xe muttered. Not him too.

“Oh come on,” Christopher countered. “It’s not like I bother you all the time.”

Cory rubbed xir eyes.

“Yeah, I know. But I already had to spend the day with mom yesterday. Don’t I get a break?”

“Don’t worry. I’m not asking you to spend the day with me. I just want to talk.”

“Ok,” xe said heavily. “Fine. Is it all right if I take a shower first?”

“Sure. I just wanted to see if I had a chance to catch you before you ran off.”

“I’m still here. Just woke up.”

“I see that. Out late?”

“I guess.”

“*That’s* a yes.”

Cory didn’t offer any details because xe knew xir dad didn’t really care about them.

Generally speaking, as long as there were no police involved, where xe had been or what xe had been doing didn’t concern him.

“Sure. Yeah.”

“Ok. Well, I’ll be downstairs. Come find me when you’re ready.”

“Sure.”

*And let’s get this over with*, xe was sure they were both thinking.

Xe still didn't feel like rushing into it though, so xe took xir time in the shower. The hot water gave xem something soothing to focus on as xe tried not to think. Dwelling on the unfairness of it all wouldn't summon xir anger, not this time. It would only increase the weight again. Better to just feel the water, feel it scald xir skin and stream through xir hair and steam xir lungs. Nothing deeper. Nothing more.

Xe didn't know how much time had passed when xe finally turned off the water. Xe could have stayed in there for hours, but ultimately that would only waste them. Xe avoided giving the time more thought than using it as motivation to move on.

Ae filled up the room, turning the air shimmery and the walls iridescent. As Cory dressed, xe said, "So apparently dad wants to have a talk."

"What about?" Ae asked through eir puppet's lips.

"Dunno. Hopefully it won't take too long."

"Do you want me to come or stay here?"

Ae normally wouldn't have asked, but e was sensitive to Cory's mood. E wanted to accommodate xir needs without peering invasively into xir soul and exacerbating the negative vibrations.

But even without their souls resonating deeply with each other, Ae's presence, however shallow, was better than eir absence.

"Come." One second. Two seconds. "Please."

As Ae began to rise up from the bed, eir body evaporated, and eir soul pulled in closer, shrinking away from the walls to become a rolling cloud hovering at xir side. E followed Cory down the stairs and to the living room where the TV was turned on to CNN and xir dad was watching alone on the couch. Cory had never liked that couch, not the cream color of the base or the almost-invisible silk paisley print or how stiff it was despite looking so plump.

When Christopher noticed Cory walk in, he turned off the TV and set the remote on the coffee table.

“Hey,” he greeted. Cory didn’t know if his tone was uncomfortable or just lukewarm, but either way, it seemed to confirm that this wasn’t intended to be an extended heart-to-heart.

“Hey,” Cory answered neutrally, coming to a stop at the arm of the couch.

“Go ahead and sit down.”

“Ok.”

None of the options appealed—the two matching chairs were just as bad—so he just sat down on the couch with enough space for a third person between them.

“Where’s mom?” he asked, only with mild curiosity. Mostly because he wanted to know if he should expect her to come through at any moment.

“Out meeting with a client.”

“Ah.”

So no.

“Yeah. So,” he began, twisting in his seat and setting a bent arm over the head of the couch. “Speaking of Carolyn, she told me about your day yesterday.”

“I’m sure *that* was an exciting story.”

“She seemed happy about it. So good job.”

Cory snorted to himself.

“What?”

“Nothing. It just didn’t have anything to do with me. She was just in a mood.”

“Well good job not ruining it. Anyway, she told me you two talked about college and said she thought you and I should talk too.”

Xe almost groaned the words “oh for fuck’s sake”. They were right there in xir mouth, but xe was too tired to go through with it.

Instead, xe just muttered, “Huh.”

“So what are you thinking?”

Xe sighed.

“I’m thinking I’m really not in a mood to talk about the future right now.”

“Yeah, well, when are you ever in a mood to talk at all?”

A fair point, but it didn’t actually help. Cory slumped against the stiff fabric (which refused to give under xir weight. Honestly, what the fuck was the point of making a couch so tight? Oh right, appearances.) and resigned to getting through this now.

“Ok. Honestly before mom brought it up, I hadn’t really thought about it at all.”

“Then what do you plan on doing with your life?”

“I don’t know.”

Christopher let a few seconds pass before he repeated, “You don’t know.”

“No.”

“How can you not know?”

It wasn’t angry or accusing. He seemed genuinely baffled.

“Because I don’t think about it. And I mean, seriously, did it ever occur to people that maybe it’s not a great idea to have teenagers figure out their life plan before they even graduate high school?”

“I’m not asking you to plan out your whole life. Most kids have at least *some* idea of what they want to do. Enough to at least pick something to get started.”

“Yeah, well.”

“What kinds of subjects do you like?”

“In school?”

“Yeah. What classes do you like?”

“That’s a joke, right?”

Christopher pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Then is there anything at *all* you like?”

“Music.”

“Ok. Can you make a career out of that?”

“I don’t *want* to make a career out of it.”

“Why?”

“Because . . .” Cory threw up a hand. “I like music because it’s for *me*, not anyone else. If I make it a career, it’s not just mine anymore. It becomes a performance and . . . I just want to enjoy it and not have to worry about whether enough people like it for me to make money from it.”

“Ok,” Christopher said slowly with a thoughtful nod. “So then you’re looking for a job that makes you enough money that you can support your *real* interest.”

“Oh, is *that* what I’m doing?”

“Sounds like it. And that makes me think even more that it’d be good for you to go into business. You go to college, get your degree, work with me for a while to get stable, and you’ll be set for life. You can make all the music you want in your own time.”

Cory didn’t have any direct, articulate response, only a rumbling dissatisfaction. He wrinkled his nose lightly and exhaled.

“Look,” Christopher said in that “reasonable adult” tone of voice. “You don’t have anything better, or more concrete in mind, do you?”

Cory muttered through a dull frown, “No.”

“Then why are you dragging your feet against the idea so much? What’s wrong with it?”

Cory shook xir head.

“I don’t know. It just . . . doesn’t sound right.”

It didn’t sound good at all. It gave xem a gross sensation that xir skin wanted to shake off.

Christopher took his turn to sigh.

“Well, I can’t force you to do anything. I just think it sounds sensible. I’m just trying to help you out and help you get ahead in life.”

Cory knew what he meant was he was just trying to fulfill some basic obligation to his spawn, and that involved offering an easy advantage he had access to, rather than, you know, actually getting to know Cory or encouraging xem to follow xir dreams or pursue xir passions—or whatever it was emotionally supportive parents did.

“Thanks.”

Xe answered flatly because xe was too used to this kind of detachment to flare up over it.

“Oh yeah, I can tell you’re really grateful.”

Christopher didn’t say it with scathing malice. It sounded more like he was trying to make a friendly sarcastic joke. Cory humored him with a soft snort.

“How about I just say I’ll plan on going that route if I don’t come up with anything else, kay?”

That way they could just be done and move on.

“Sure.”

Then Christopher made a nonchalant shrug.

“Well, not to give you any bad ideas, but *technically* you could take all the money we’ve put aside for you and live off that for a while. For as long as you can make it last, I guess. But

once that runs out you'd be on your own, so." Another shrug. "But I don't know. Maybe that's what you want to do."

He said it with a condescending tone of voice that made it clear he hoped not and discouraged Cory from going through with it even if it was what xe wanted. He expected Cory to have enough sense to take advantage of the lucky circumstances xe had been born into. Because who wouldn't? He and Carolyn had already assured Cory they would pay xir way through undergrad, especially since it was pretty certain xe wasn't going to be getting any scholarships. A road was laid out for xem with gold bricks, who wouldn't choose it?

But no matter how smooth and clean and rich the road was, Cory couldn't forget that it was ultimately leading to death—and all too soon. Xe wasn't ready to commit to that. Xe still wanted to search for the eternal road. It had to be somewhere. There had to be a way to get to it . . . But living off a trust fund probably wasn't it.

"I don't know. Doesn't sound like something I'm ready to jump on."

Xe could imagine someone else with a greater appetite for the world and adventure getting a spark from the idea of taking so much money and backpacking around Europe and India or something. Taking some time to "find themselves" or whatever. But that wasn't xem. Xe had xir sights set even further away.

"All right then. Well, that's pretty much all I've got to say about that for now."

Cory was about to ask, "So we're done?" but then Christopher kept talking.

"Carolyn also told me you're planning on bringing someone to dinner next week. She's pretty excited about it."

"Hnh. Not sure why."

Christopher didn't try to offer any explanations.

"So who is this person exactly?"

Cory wondered if the question meant that Carolyn hadn't told Christopher what xe had said about Ae or if she had told him and Christopher still wasn't clear on it.

"They're just someone I'm close with."

Xe only said it dismissively because xe wasn't in a mood to get deep into it.

"What does that mean?"

Cory raised an eyebrow.

"It means what I said. They're a person, and we're close."

"Ok. I heard you. That's just . . . kind of vague."

"Yeah, well, maybe I'm ok with that."

Christopher looked at Cory like xe was suddenly a page with small print.

"Is this someone you know from school?"

"No. We met through music."

"So they play an instrument?" Christopher guessed.

"Not really." Cory was pretty sure Ae could play any instrument e wanted to, but that wasn't the point. "But we have the same taste, and that counts for a lot."

"I see. So is this person a boy or a girl?"

Cory really didn't feel up for having the same conversation as yesterday again, but xe couldn't think of a good way around it.

"Neither."

"What?"

"Neither. That's why I use 'they' and not 'he' or 'she' when I talk about them."

Christopher furrowed his brow in confusion, but before he could follow up with another question, Cory asked, "What did mom tell you when she said I was bringing someone?"

“Not much. Pretty much just that, and that she was really curious to meet the person. So when you say ‘neither’, what do you mean?”

Cory dropped xir face into xir hand and began rubbing xir eyes.

“Do you actually want to know, or are you just asking so you can tell me I’m wrong?”

“What?”

Cory looked up with a sigh.

“If I tell you that there are just some people in the world who don’t buy into this whole idea that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are the only options, are you just going to think that’s crazy and say I’m wrong?”

Christopher just stared at Cory for a moment, and Cory had no idea what he was thinking, but xe was prepared to get angry and defensive when xe saw Christopher prepare to speak again.

“So, what *are* the other options if someone isn’t a man or a woman?”

Cory didn’t know the true thought behind the question, so xe was still stiff when xe answered.

“Whatever feels right to the person. I don’t know, I only know how Ae and I feel about it. But I’ve heard some people are like, something in-between, or like, a mix of both, or even something else entirely.”

“How *you* feel about it? You’re including yourself in this too?”

“Yeah.” Cory felt a heavy “Here we fucking go” rise up in xir chest. “I mean, I just don’t get it. This whole dividing people up into ‘man’ and ‘woman’ like billions of people actually fit into just two boxes just seems really stupid and wrong.”

“Well,” Christopher said slowly. “You’re either a man or a woman because of your biology, right?”

“No, it’s not just biology,” xe countered quickly. “People treat you differently and expect different things from you based on whether they think you’re a man or a woman. Things that have absolutely nothing to do with biology. Like, they expect girls to like make-up and fashion and babies and romance, and they expect boys to like cars and dirt and wrestling and fighting. What does any of that have to do with biology? It’s things that people decided were what made a man a man and a woman a woman. And you know it’s true because if a man shows any interest in like, I don’t know, ballet or hair styling, or if he cries, people will say he’s not a ‘real man’. If it was just about biology, how could people think to say that? If was just about biology, why would you need anything else to be a ‘real man’? So the way I see it, all this gender stuff is just artificial boundaries people’ve put around each other and then they try to justify it by saying it’s ‘biology’. But that’s bullshit and it’s such a flimsy excuse that if you poke around just a *little bit* it falls apart. So I don’t buy it. And I don’t think of myself as a ‘man’, and it doesn’t tell you anything about me to call me a man. It just makes people put expectations on me without actually knowing me. It’s fucking *stupid*.”

Christopher stared at Cory again, but he didn’t have the squinted eyes from before. He had his head propped up by the arm bent on the head of the couch, and he drummed his other fingers on his knee in thought.

“Hm,” he said after a moment. “Interesting.”

Cory didn’t know what to do with that, so xe didn’t say anything.

Christopher drummed his fingers a few more times.

“I’ve never thought about that before. But it’s interesting. Hm.” He took a deep breath.

“So did I hear you call the person you’re bringing over ‘Ae’?”

Cory had to process the question for a few extra seconds.

“Yeah.”

“Hm. All right. Anything else you want to tell me before I meet them?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” Cory said slowly, feeling weirdly uncertain. “Anything you *want* to know?”

Christopher shrugged.

“Nothing in particular. I can wait until Friday to learn more about them.”

“Ok.” Cory furrowed xir brows a few times, and then xir confusion got too big to hold down. “So, you’re just . . . ok with it. It’s just ‘interesting’. That’s it.”

Christopher looked at xem with a relaxed expression.

“Well like I said, I’ve never thought about any of that before, so I don’t really have much else to say about it. I’d have to give it a little more thought before I had any kind of real opinion. But if you feel strongly about it—*especially* if you feel strongly about it, I’d rather be more prepared to have the discussion than I am now. And you know, I’ve always wanted you to live your own life. And if this is the kind of thing you’ve ended up at, sounds to me like you really have been living your life for yourself. And I think that’s great.”

He said it like he had been worried all this time that Cory might have ended up getting arrested for some violent crime or other. If instead xe was just thinking too hard about gender identities, then that was a relief.

Cory wanted to be happy at not being challenged or condescended to, but . . . xe mostly just felt unsettled, drifting in a fog. It was surprising, and yet, not enough. It wasn’t enough to make up for an almost non-existent relationship. It wasn’t enough to feel a spark, like maybe, maybe Christopher really did care about xem, and maybe Cory could actually like him, and that maybe all this time they really were compatible. It was only enough to make the world feel a little shaken for a moment as reality clashed with expectation.

So xe didn't know what to say. Xe only managed an uncertain sound from the back of xir throat as xe shifted a little in xir seat.

“Well, I don't want to keep you. I just wanted to be able to tell Carolyn I followed up about college.”

“Mm.”

“So, since we got through that, would you happen to want to go out to lunch, or something?”

He asked it like they were practically strangers, like they were both the friend of the same friend and were testing the waters to see if they could be friends in their own right.

“Ehhh,” Cory began while picking at the fringe around the decorative couch pillow. “Mom kind of wore me out yesterday. I thought I'd just stay in and . . . maybe play some piano for a while.” Xe said it with a hint of apology because xe felt xe owed Christopher at least a little grace in exchange for the minimally positive reception of xir sudden rant.

“I thought so. But I thought I'd ask anyway.” Cory had expected him to look like he had taken a gamble and come out with a win, but instead he looked vaguely disappointed. Cory would have thought it was xir imagination, but xe could taste it in the surface of his soul, like a little sprinkling of salt. As Christopher stood up, Cory held back the confusion from being too loud on xir face.

“Well,” Christopher said, like he was trying to motivate himself to get going. “Guess I'll see you later, sometime.”

“Yeah,” Cory agreed, then when Christopher began to walk away xe felt a strange compulsion and said, “Have a good day.”

Xe was already cringing inside, wondering what the fuck had made xem say something like that, when Christopher looked at xem and said, “Thanks. You too.”

Cory waited stiffly on the couch for Christopher to pass out of the living room and into the kitchen. Xe listened until xe heard the back door open and close, and only when xe heard Christopher's car humming down the long driveway did xe finally let xir face wrinkle and hiss, "What the fuck?"

Xe could have gone deeper into Christopher to find out exactly what he was thinking, but even though xe had had the ability for a few months now, reading people hadn't become a habit. Actually, Cory actively avoided it. Accessibility to people's souls didn't make them more approachable, it made them more repellent—there was just way more information there than xe wanted. So xe didn't think to just look inside Christopher's thoughts for the answer until after he was gone. But even then, xe decided xe preferred to just stay out.

Ae then manifested on the arm of the couch, like smoke getting thicker and weaving together in the span of three seconds until e was balancing on eir back with eir legs sticking straight upward in the air. Cory turned xir head to look at em, but Ae's head was hanging off the edge of the arm, so eir eyes couldn't look back. Not that that mattered.

"Comfortable?"

Ae had eir hands set flat on eir abdomen and tapped some of eir fingers.

"It's all the same to me."

Of course it was. Ae didn't have a nervous system anyway. Why would e go through the trouble of adding anything to eir body that would allow em to feel pain and discomfort if e didn't have to?

Ae then pulled eir head to the side to look at Cory with eir eyes. "But *you're* not," e observed.

"No," Cory confirmed before beating xir fist into the cushion a few times. "This couch is hard as a rock. Christ."

Cory got up and was about to head straight for the piano, when xe realized xe was hungry. Not for anything in particular, just hungry, the dull ache from xir stomach demanding something. Anything. So xe took a detour to the kitchen and browsed through everything—the fridge, the freezer, the pantry, a few cabinets. All the options, no matter how long xe stared, left xem feeling uninspired. Since xe didn't want anything, xe decided to just go for something that wouldn't take much time or effort.

So xe smothered a thick layer of peanut butter on one slice of thick, multigrain bread, uneven clumps of strawberry jam on another, and then sliced up a banana until xe had enough circles to stick in the peanut butter in tight rows. Xe pressed the sticky banana face down into the jam and wiped the knife clean on xir tongue before setting it in the sink. Xe ate it at the counter, along with a glass of water, focusing just on getting it over with. Xe washed xir hands, rinsed the knife before putting it in the dishwasher, and then returned to the living room.

When xe walked in, Ae was lying along the couch's curved back, one boot-sole set against it and the other leg crossed over at the knee, eir foot bouncing in the air. Cory knew there wasn't any dirt on Ae's boots, so xe wasn't worried about em dirtying the clean, pearly fabric, but if *Carolyn* saw that . . .

“So I hate to say it, but you should probably sit like a normal person on Friday.”

Ae smiled and stretched air arms backward in the air behind eir head.

“I don't mind.”

The living room was big enough that it was designed into two spaces, one oriented around the TV and the other emphasizing the piano. From Ae's position, e could watch Cory take a seat and open the lid. Ae perked into attention as Cory set xir hands in place. The sheet music tray was empty because xe didn't need it. All xe needed was to hear a song in xir head and

xe could bring it out. Since one was already going, Cory just had to stop its progress and bring it back to the beginning.

At first it was just a simple melody, just one note at a time, like a sad lullaby. Once. Twice. Three times. Then slower, slower on the fourth, a small change in the last note. Xe let it hum until it was almost gone.

And then xe brought it in again, a bit louder, with chords to fill it out. Once. Twice. Three times.

Xe didn't slow down at the fourth. Xe used it as the final step of the warm-up before breaking into a run and *BOOM*-ing in the first verse. Xe swayed back and forth with the beat xe set as xe summoned a storm with xir fingers. Xe had played a version on the guitar, but the piano provided a wider range that let xem take it even deeper and darker, and let xem play multiple layers at once.

Xe pushed out the song, feeling like a god crafting a new world. It whirled around xem as xe hovered in space, compelling billions of shiny particles to gravitate together. With xir notes xe directed them here and there, forming spirals and clusters until it all fused together in a magnificent flash.

Combustion formed a whole, and then standing there in xir world, Cory pushed on, summoning storms full of heartbeat thunder and shriek lightning and wailing winds. And rain. So much rain. Drenching xem as xe conducted the storm with outstretched, swinging arms. Pouring out in a translation that made xir soul comprehensible to outsiders' ears.

It all meshed together so thoroughly Cory could hardly distinguish between the scenes. But xir hands never got confused. Even if xir soul couldn't separate the piano from the rain, xir fingers remained in their own landscape, agile travelers up and down the familiar ivory road so full of power, possibility, potential. It was up to Cory to draw it out.

And xe did. For three hours xe transformed the room into a living concert, melting the walls away to make room for the vigorous winds that rustled xir clothes and lifted xir long hair off xir shoulders. The rains soaked through xir skin and sloshed over the slick black frame of the Yamaha, but the music continued to flow clear and bold. Cory played some of the same songs over and over without ever letting them end, just stitching the beginning right back into the final verse in a continuous loop until xe allowed it to unfurl into a new song, like the next movement of a symphony. If xe slowed down, it was only in preparation for a running jump off a cliff, a quiet suspension in the air, and a massive landing, the earth cratering under xir feet and an ocean erupting around xem.

Behind Cory, Ae shared in the world xir imagination conjured, dancing in the storms like a figure made of water, fluid limbs flowing and splashing as they rolled in waves over and into themselves. Nothing could have tired em, but it was different for Cory. Eventually xir hands needed a break, so xe directed the concert to a close, turning the storm gradually into gentle pattering. Xe didn't go so far as to let the sun come through. Instead xe let the final song close with a haunting melody, and when the clouds were cleared away, a black sky stretched wide and swallowed the fading notes, leaving Cory with an ache in their place.

Xe missed it already, missed the feeling of putting xir whole body into the music. A song was always playing inside, but when it also coursed through xir shoulders and hands, xir throat and tongue and legs, every muscle and every bone and every nerve, xe was actually glad to have them. When everything synergized for that one purpose, xir flesh stopped being a cage and became a conductor, surging with fifty thousand amps. But when the current went dry, even breathing became a chore xe resented having to do.

Cory gently closed the lid over the keys and flexed xir fingers a little. Xir nails were still neatly coated in black, but that wouldn't last long. The polish would start to chip soon, certainly the next time xe played the guitar.

Xe didn't have anything specific in mind to do now. Xe wanted to just lie down and dissolve away. Xe turned on the bench to find Ae stabilizing eir body back into a solid human form. When e took steps to approach Cory, e glided further than e should have, like e was skating across ice. E sat down on the bench facing the opposite of Cory and they looked at each other with heads turned.

*//What now?//* Ae hummed curiously.

Xe thought vaguely for a moment. Xe didn't know how cold it was outside, but xe could probably put on a heavy jacket and be fine.

*//Maybe some time in the woods.//*

A walk sounded like the next best thing to just lying down for a while and doing nothing. And xe thought that, maybe out there, in a space all to themselves, Ae could take some time to concentrate on figuring out a way to fix xir wretched condition.

*//I like the woods,//* was Ae's response. It had nice vibrations, after all.

*//Great.//*

Cory opened the front door to gauge the weather. Gray clouds coated the sky, but it was dry, and there was only a chill in the air, nothing that stung or froze. But being out there for a while would probably give the chill time to sink in to an uncomfortable depth, so xe went up to xir room and pulled out a heavy biker jacket. Since xe planned on being out a while, xe made a stop in the kitchen to stuff down a quick snack. Before xe had decided on anything, the phone rang. The volume was so loud they harmonized from all over the house, but Cory didn't even

look at the phone on the kitchen wall. Phone calls were never for xem, so xe just kept browsing the fridge for something that seemed palatable.

Cory vaguely expected to hear the recording of Carolyn's voice inviting any clients or associates to leave messages that she would return as soon as possible, since most calls were to her business line. But instead it was Christopher's voice announcing simply, "You've reached the Rhys residence. Please leave your name, number, and a brief message. Thank you." Cory had xir head sideways against the door when the beep sounded.

"Hi," said a familiar voice from the answering machine, "this is Zoe Allen."

Cory flinched and froze. *Zoe?*

"I was calling to see if this was Cory Rhys' number. If it's not, sorry to bother you. But if it is—"

Cory broke out xir stupefaction quick enough to slam the door and sprint to the phone.

"—Cory, you can call me back at—"

"Zoe?" Cory asked, not just to get her attention, but to check that it was really her.

"Oh, hey! Cory?" Zoe answered, sounding pleasantly surprised.

"Yeah." Xe folded xir free arm up close against xir chest. "How'd you get my number?"

"Well, I do have a phone book. And there aren't actually that many Rhyses in there, so I just started from the top. Nice of your dad to have a C name."

"Oh." Cory had only ever spoken to school staff and family members on the phone, as far as xe could remember. Phones were useful because they kept people at a distance. Xe didn't have experience using them with people that didn't annoy xem. It felt weird. "So . . . what's up?"

"I wanted to see if you were interested in meeting up with me for a bit."

“Uhh.” Xe waffled on it for a moment, since xe had been just about to follow xir own plans. But Zoe was different from Christopher. If she was going through the trouble of inviting xem like this, xe was actually interested in finding out why.

Or at least some part of xem was. It required a little shift in xir mind about what xe was going to be doing next, but since xe hadn’t been super committed to begin with, it wasn’t so hard.

“Sure.”

“I’m not twisting your arm here or anything. You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“I know. It’s fine. I’m not doing anything right now. Where do you want to meet?”

“Ok. I was thinking Avri’s. Do you know it? It the café right by campus. I’ll buy you some coffee or whatever else you want.”

“You don’t have to buy me anything,” xe said on a reflex.

“You sure? I’d feel bad inviting you out and then making you pay.”

“Don’t. It’s fine. I don’t want you spending your money on me.”

“Mm, ok, if that’s really how you feel.”

“It is.”

“Ok. Can you be there by three?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Ok. See you there.”

“Yeah.”

Cory hung up and stared at the phone for a moment. Then xe noticed the flashing 1 on the answering machine and hit play.

“Hi, this is Zoe Allen.”

Cory hit delete. Xe didn't want Carolyn to hear the message and get curious. Xe looked at the kitchen clock and saw that it was just two-fifteen. Be there by three? As long as traffic wasn't bad, xe would be there sooner.

"Ok," xe muttered to xemself, then looking at Ae said, "guess we're gonna be around people today."

Xe could have avoided that by offering xir house as the meeting place, but frankly, xe was embarrassed by it. It was just so much house for just three people, it felt like it was showing off just by existing, before even considering all of Carolyn's luxury room designs. Besides, xe didn't know when either of xir parents would be back. Just a voicemail was too much, xe definitely didn't want Carolyn to walk in and see Zoe in the flesh.

So xe pulled out xir keys and hoped Zoe appreciated that xe would sacrifice xir alone time for her like this.

\*

Cory walked through the door of Avri's just before two-forty-five. It was cozy with a warm atmosphere that felt like sitting near a fireplace. Cory didn't see any fire, but the smell of coffee was so strong xe imagined the place smelled that way all the time, like it came from the walls rather than the actual coffee. The chairs, couches, and tables were full mostly of college students, some studying, some reading, some chatting, all with a cup of something or other. Cory looked around for a place close to the door where xe and Ae could wait for Zoe, but then xe discovered xe didn't have to.

"Hey!"

He looked toward the voice the instant xe heard it. Just like in the bar, Zoe's voice carried over everything else. Xe saw that she was sitting at a table in xir line of sight, waving at xem as if she didn't already stand out. Cory popped xir chin as a greeting and then followed the winding

path of open space in between the various obstacles to reach her. Ae followed closely behind, moving with easy grace even though eir attention was scattered toward all the new souls e wanted to lick. E let her nebula spread its tongues throughout the space while eir puppet's steps were ballet-light.

"I didn't think you'd get here so fast," Zoe said as Cory sat down in one of the seats on the opposite side of the table. Ae sat down next to xem, eir gold eyes glazed over while e was busy taking stock of all the flavors the café's patron menu offered.

"Then why are you here already?"

"I wasn't doing anything else after Aki had to go, so I figured I'd come and claim a spot. But I wanted to give you plenty of time so you didn't feel rushed."

Cory watched as Zoe put away a book that she had apparently been reading and glimpsed the title, *Research on the African-American Family: A Holistic Perspective*. Sometimes Cory was so used to thinking of her as Zoe the bartender that xe forgot she was aiming to be Zoe the therapist. Cory had never been to any kind of counseling, even though xe was well aware xe fell into the category of "troubled teen" that would qualify for it, but xe still didn't have a positive image when xe imagined a therapist. So the fact that Zoe looked nothing like that image was a good thing in xir mind.

"I didn't. But thanks."

Zoe looked at Ae's spaced-out face, and knowing exactly what e was doing, she laughed under her breath.

"Well good. So did you want anything?"

Xe didn't, but xe looked at the counter and the chalkboard menu on the back wall as if xe was considering it.

“Maybe later.” Xe noticed that Zoe already had a small cup that was down to just a soft ring of drying leftovers at the very bottom, but xe asked anyway, “You?”

“I was thinking I’d get a smoothie.”

Xe would have brought up the low temperatures outside, but it seemed beside the point with as warm as it was inside.

“They have those here?”

“Oh yeah. They’ve got tons of drinks. Sure you don’t want anything?”

“I’m good right now.”

Xe also wasn’t interested in trying to make a choice out of “tons”. It would take too much time to read the menu, and xe didn’t have any craving to help narrow it down. Xe was already expecting to leave the place without getting anything.

“All right, well give me a few minutes and I’ll be back.”

“Sure.”

Cory folded xir arms on the table and glanced around to take in the surroundings. Even being in the same buildings as all the customers and staff, xe felt detached, like xe wasn’t really there, like xe was seeing it on a screen from a safe distance. Xe sat there thinking nothing of it all, just playing a song in xir head and tapping xir fingers with the beat.

Zoe came back with a glass full to the brim with something thick and light purple. She sat down and stuck a straw into it, gave it a gentle stir, then sucked up a mouthful.

“Mmm,” she said enthusiastically. “So good.” She held the straw and tapped it a few times against the bottom of the glass while looking at Cory thoughtfully. “So, how are you doing?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You.”

“Uhh.” Cory shrugged noncommittally. “I’m fine.”

Zoe smirked knowingly.

“No you’re not.”

Cory just looked at her.

“I’m not just making small-talk here,” Zoe clarified. “I’m really asking. I want to know how you are. For real.”

“Why?”

“*Why?*” Zoe dropped an arm onto the table incredulously. “Because I like you and I care about you, you little idiot. ‘Why’. Honestly.”

Cory stiffened and shifted and ground his teeth, but he didn’t snap back.

“Why *all of a sudden?*” he asked.

“What do you mean ‘all of a sudden’? I’m always interested to know how you are.”

“Ok, but like, you called me and invited me out here to, what, just ask me how I’m doing?”

“Yeah.” Zoe gave him a funny look. “You know, that’s a thing friends do. They like to hang out and talk and stay updated on each other’s lives.”

Cory didn’t know what to say to that. He didn’t have any experience with friends so he didn’t really know how it generally worked. He looked around again, getting an odd feeling like suddenly he was becoming uncomfortably exposed. He wanted to be fine in front of them. Absolutely fine. How did Zoe expect him to just crack open that fine exterior in a place where any of these other people could see?

“You don’t have to worry about anyone else in here,” Zoe said. “They’re all too busy with their own stuff to care about us.”

It seemed true. No one was looking toward Cory as xe passed xir gaze over everyone. And the buzz made it difficult for xem to hear clearly what anyone else was saying. But even so.

“Can’t you just like, look inside and see how I’m doing?”

“I could,” Zoe agreed. “If that’s really what you want. But I thought maybe you’d want to put it in your own words. I thought you like expressing yourself in your own way.” She took another long sip from her smoothie and Cory watched the top line sink lower in the glass. When xe didn’t say anything, she looked at Ae, who had retracted back into a small cloud rolling and wisping like steam in the air above eir puppet. The taste testing was over.

“I know you have Ae,” she said after turning her eyes back to Cory. “But you can talk to me too. If you want. I’m open to anything. But if that’s not something you’re up for, that’s fine too. I just wanted you to know, and I thought it was better to take some time to make a point rather than just, you know, tell you on the phone or in passing when you’re busy with the band.”

She had serious eyes when she looked at xem.

Cory wanted to look back. Xe didn’t want to be weak or uncomfortable just from a look. But she wanted to see xem. That wasn’t something xe could just dismiss with an annoyed eye roll. But xe didn’t know if xe could do it, just start talking right there on the spot like that. Performing in front of people was different. That was a choice. That was controlled. When xe sang a song xe wrote in front of an audience, it was about as honest and open as xe could get, but there was power in it. Art turned pain into strength. Just sitting down and *talking* . . . There was no art in that. No strength. It was just pure vulnerability. Xe couldn’t let xemself be vulnerable around people who didn’t deserve it.

But because it was Zoe, it triggered a conflict. Zoe had good music in her soul. Her presence had a vibe to it that xe liked being around. It drew xem in and made xem want to accept xer offer.

Xir hesitation in the face of her secure self-confidence made xem shift xir eyes. Xe flexed xir hands and tapped xir heel and rocked a little in xir seat. It was awkward, sitting there, not knowing what xe was going to do.

But after a moment of working through the uncertainty, the first thing xe said was, “I don’t know.” Xe looked away from both Zoe and Ae and drummed xir hand on the table. “I mean . . . I don’t know.”

Zoe finished another sip and leaned forward on folded arms.

“What’s going on?”

Cory shook xir head.

“I mean, it’s mostly just the same,” xe said in a low voice. “I’m just tired of being here and everything. But there’s nothing I can do about it. So I’m just . . . I don’t know, I’m just irritated all the time, you know? I feel like I’m always on edge, ready to blow up at anything. That’s like my default. But right now, I’m like . . . I’m just kind of worn out. Like, I just feel tired. Like I just want to go to sleep and never wake up because I’m just . . . heavy. Inside.” Xe looked down at xir hands and exhaled. “I don’t know. I just . . . I don’t know.”

Zoe kept her eyes on xem as she listened. She let out a long breath through her nose and said, “I’m sorry. You’ve got it rough.”

Cory lifted a hand to xir forehead.

“That’s the thing though, I don’t think I do. Pretty much everyone has it worse than me. *Everyone*. The only reason I’m so pissed off and frustrated is because the whole world feels fucked up and there’s nothing I can do about it. Anyone else in my place would probably be having a great time, just living it up and taking advantage of how easy everything is for me. But I can’t. I feel like I’m stuck in some sick game, and I don’t want to win, I just want out. I would literally feel a hundred times better if the world was a completely different place. That’s what it

would take. All the therapy and medication in the world isn't going to change the fact that everything I hate is coming from the outside. I *want* to be happier. I want there to be more to life than just coping. But how the fuck am I supposed to feel good about anything when going outside feels like stepping into a literal sewer and everyone is just always adding more and more shit? Like, *that's* the problem, you know? *That's* what needs to be fixed. And I'm just like . . . how the fuck is that gonna happen? It's not. It's never gonna happen. So I'm just gonna be angry and heavy my whole life until I finally just fucking die with absolutely no point to any of it."

Cory couldn't look at Zoe as xe spoke or after xe finished, but Zoe kept her eyes on xem as she listened and as she considered xem for a moment in silence.

"You've really got a lot weighing you down," she said gently.

Cory shrugged.

"I guess. But I mean, I think it's a pretty reasonable way to feel. I don't understand how everyone else can just live like everything's all right."

"Well, most people have other things that make them happy to balance it out. People aren't usually good at being miserable all the time. Even kids in war zones will play games."

"Hnh. Guess I never figured out how to do that."

"You have your own coping mechanisms. Everyone does. And you should know, I think you're right. No, I know you're right. A lot of problems people have are definitely because of things being fucked up. I may be going into therapy, but I know that helping out individual people like that isn't going to fix the bigger issues in society."

"Then why even bother? Won't it just be depressing to feel like you're fighting a war you can't win? It's just gonna keep going on and on and on and nothing'll ever change."

"Maybe. But I have to do it anyway. I'm just like that. I have to help who I can, even if it doesn't change the world. But just so you know, I'm not trying to get you into therapy. In case

you were thinking I had some plan in the works to convince you to try it. I promise I'm not making a project out of you, I'm just here as a friend. Unless you *want* me to get all therapist on you, then I can."

Cory snorted.

"You're the only one I'd even consider."

"I'll take that honor."

"It's true though. Who else could I talk to about Ae?"

"Mm. True."

Zoe then looked at Ae, who unlike Cory, had no qualms looking back directly. Zoe noticed that e didn't blink and wondered if it was on purpose or just because Ae forgot to apply that human habit to eir puppet.

"So Ae," she said curiously, "what do *you* think of things around here?"

Ae pulled eir legs up and bent them in between eir body and the table before folding eir arms on top of eir knees.

"On Earth?"

"Yeah. You've been here a while now, right? How does it all look to you?"

Ae looked at Cory first, then back to Zoe.

"It still seems very strange. I can see how everything works. I can see cells and atoms and things you don't even have words for that are smaller than that, but I still don't fully understand how humans think and live. All these waves here that make matter and light and energy—all of that makes sense. It all follows patterns. But humans? They do things that don't make any sense. Some of it is interesting, and some of it . . ." Ae looked at Cory again. "I see how much damage it can cause." E looked back to Zoe. "So I'm more confused than anything else. No matter how

many people I look into, it doesn't help me find a pattern. It just makes humans seem more chaotic.”

“Hmm.”

Zoe stirred the half of her smoothie that was left while looking at Ae thoughtfully.

“Yeah, people are definitely hard to predict. Everyone's got their own experiences, and there's always a ton of different factors affecting how we see the world and make decisions, so we're all pretty unique. We're all the sum of all the small things and all the big things that have happened in our lives and shaped us. That's why it's hard to really know someone. You can't see everything that makes them who they are. Usually,” she added with a knowing smile. “And I mean, I think that's what makes people so interesting. We're complicated.”

“Well, good thing you think so,” Cory noted. “You're gonna be dealing with a lot of complicated people in your job.”

“True,” Zoe agreed, her smile turning wry. “But I'm thinking it should be easier for me since I can actually *know* people now. I'll be able to see all the things that make them who they are, so I'll have the pieces there to work with.”

“And your job will be to help these people—your patients—understand themselves better in order to make better choices,” Ae recited, recalling what e knew about the profession.

“Right. I'm kind of there to shine a light on things that a patient might not be aware of, and then offer strategies they can try to tackle whatever problems they're dealing with. And it's always on them to follow through. I can't do anything but offer another perspective on things, hopefully a helpful one.”

“So what do you do if they just don't do anything?” Cory asked.

Zoe sighed a long sigh. “Well, that can happen. And when it does, we just kind of go over it all again and try to figure out why they didn’t change anything and then maybe try a different approach.”

“God, that’s so much work.”

“Oh yeah,” Zoe agreed. “And believe me, I get plenty frustrated when people just stay in their ruts. They’re basically sabotaging themselves. But I’ve always got hope that anyone can change. It’s usually just a matter of environment and incentives.”

“‘Just’?” Cory repeated skeptically.

“I just mean I don’t think anyone’s inherently *evil* or *lazy* or whatever. People become what they are over time, and they can become something different. I can’t work magic or anything, but I’d like to think I can at least give people a sense of their own potential.” She tapped the straw against the bottom of the glass as she looked from Cory to Ae once, then again. “Though, I was starting to think,” she said slowly. She tapped the straw again, then said, “What if *you* could do something? More than I can, I mean?”

They both stared at her, Ae looking more curious next to Cory’s version of a deer in headlights.

“Me?”

“Yeah. I mean, we can go right into people’s souls and see everything about them. Every little detail about their lives and personality and everything. But I was wondering if *you* could do more than that? If you could maybe actually *change* something about someone. Like if you went into a person and you saw that they, for example, are super homophobic. Like they think gay people are literally spreading Satan around with their gay agenda or something. Could you reach in there and just . . . tweak their soul a little and make them not homophobic anymore?”

At first Ae didn't say anything, but then e turned to Cory and said, "This is what you would call a 'coincidence', right?"

While Zoe wondered what that meant, Cory shrug-nodded.

"I guess it fits."

Ae got a satisfied smile, like e was proud of emself for getting it right.

"What's the coincidence?" Zoe asked.

"Cory asked a similar question just yesterday."

Zoe looked at Cory, pleasantly surprised.

"Did you really?"

Cory tapped xir hand against the table and dropped xir eyes again.

"I was really just asking about myself," xe mumbled.

"Why yourself?"

Xe exhaled heavily. Compared to Zoe's noble goals, xir own suddenly seemed selfish and petty.

"I wanted Ae to fix whatever is keeping me from being able to drop this body and get the fuck out of here."

Xe didn't know what kind of face Zoe made in response to that, but she didn't sound judgmental when she asked Ae, "*Can* you?"

Cory peeked sideways to see Ae answer, "I don't know. I've never tried to change anything before."

"Hmm." Zoe took another long drink from the straw and when her mouth was empty she shifted a little on her arms. Looking Ae in the eye she asked, "Well what about now? Is it something you want to try?"

Ae looked at Cory.

“I’m interested in helping Cory. I would be happy if it *is* possible for me to push them along so they can finally break away from their body. As for everyone else though . . . I suppose I’m not against causing some changes. If you humans are going to be confined here, I think it’s unfortunate that your lives are so hard. But I’m surprised there’s such a strong feeling here that some people have a right to force their own interests on others. This is the only place I’ve ever been to where that idea exists.”

“Maybe that’s why we’re all stuck here,” Cory muttered. “The universe doesn’t want us to spread out and infect everywhere else, so it put a curse on us. Earth is a quarantine and humans are the disease.”

“I don’t think that’s what happened,” Ae said thoughtfully. “The universe isn’t conscious.”

Cory looked at Ae like xe didn’t know whether to laugh or bang xir head against the table.

“Oh,” Ae said slowly after tasting xir vibrations to get xir meaning. “You meant that metaphorically.”

Cory settled on a dry snort.

“Yeah.”

Zoe snickered to herself as she finished off her smoothie, using the straw like a spoon to push the last remains sideways along the inside wall of the glass until they could slide in a neat line into her open mouth. She set the glass down and folded her arms again.

“What are you doing tonight?”

Cory went blank at the sudden question, but after a moment xe was still blank.

“Uhhh. I don’t know. I don’t have any plans.” The next band practice wasn’t until tomorrow, so that wasn’t on the agenda. Xe supposed xe could go on that walk into the woods with Ae.

“Well if you want, you can come hang out with me at work. I’ll let you in through the back.”

Cory looked around for a clock. Xe owned a watch, a nice one xir grandpa had given xem for Christmas one year, but xe never wore it. It was too nice, first of all. Embarrassingly nice. And secondly, it just didn’t match up well with xir style.

“What time do you start?”

“Tonight I work six to two.”

“Fuck,” Cory muttered. “You’re telling me you work hours like that, *and* go to school, *and* see therapy clients?”

“And I have a steady girlfriend,” she added proudly.

“How?”

“Lots of determination, and maybe a little insomnia. But I’ve always had a full schedule my whole life. I’m used to it.”

“Fuck,” xe muttered again, shaking xir head.

“You really don’t need to feel bad for me. I like what I do.”

“Yeah, but still. That’s a *lot*.” Cory was both impressed and exhausted just thinking about it. Xe only did the bare minimum for school and only put real effort into xir music. Xir life was full of free time to do nothing but think about how much everything sucked. The privilege seemed ironic and grossly unfair.

“Yeah,” Zoe agreed breezily, “but it’s worth it. So what do you think? You wanna come or no?”

Cory went slack and sighed.

“Maybe. I kind of wanted to go for a walk today, but . . .”

“Well why don’t we do that right now? We’ve got time. It’ll be a nice way to relax before I take care of a Saturday night crowd.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You want to?”

“I mean, sure, yeah.”

“Ok. Let’s do it. You sure you don’t want to get anything to go?”

Cory took another glance at the prohibitive amount of options on the chalkboard.

“No, I’m good.”

“Ok then.”

She stood up first, prompting Cory to follow suit, and then Ae got up by stretching one leg out to Cory’s empty seat and crawling across until e was standing next to xem.

“We can walk around the campus trail. That’s the closest path. Or we can just wander around.”

“Campus trail is fine.”

At least that way the circle would bring them back to their cars without them having to keep track of their location.

“Cool.”

Cory had never walked with anyone before—anyone besides Ae. But Cory considered em in a completely separate category, so xe didn’t know what it would be like with another human. But then again, Zoe was a special category of human. It would probably be fine. They walked out the door and Cory stuffed xir hands into xir jacket pockets as a wall of cool air washed over xem, thick as water.

## CHAPTER 7

Regulars called it Mike's.

The official name of the place though, in ads and phonebooks, was Crooked Lines. Mike was the current owner, along with his sister-in-law Kim, but the place had been the vision of Mike's brother, Kirk. The story was known by many, since Kirk had liked to tell it.

Kirk had discovered, after a year of marriage, that he was, in fact, gay. (And he found it so utterly hilarious that he laughed loudly every time he said it.) When he brought it up with Kim, she in turn revealed that she was, as she had recently figured out, bisexual, with her interest tending more often toward women. They had a good laugh about it together, which took away any worries they had had about sharing the truth. And in hindsight, it made sense. They had always been good, close friends, they just hadn't realized that the intimate feelings of friendship they felt for each other weren't actually sexual or romantic.

But they realized that was ok. They worked well as friends living together the way they did. They *liked* living together, even if they didn't sleep together. The idea of going through a divorce and restructuring their whole lives because of one little thing just seemed like way too much work for not much reward. So they kept their marriage, and it only got better once they understood the nature of their relationship. Part of that included happily welcoming other kinds of partners for each other if one appeared. The few times that Kirk brought home a man for a night or Kim brought home someone else, they were always happy for the other, and comforted each other if the end of a short fling hurt.

They always had each other, the one who felt like home, who was stable and reliable, no matter what else happened.

Then in 1980, Kirk decided he wanted to open a bar. More than that, he aspired to create a real hub in the local community, a place where anyone could feel welcome and safe. He wanted to create a place that felt like home, especially for those who didn't have one already.

Kim hadn't been sure how he could do that with a *bar*, but Kirk's vision and passion weren't fleeting whims and she couldn't help but want to support him. And since he had plenty of money from his job in the computer industry to play around with, it didn't feel like too outrageous a risk.

Kirk asked Mike to join him too, and Mike agreed.

Unlike Kirk, Mike wasn't much of a talker, so no one knew what he was, gay or straight or something else. As far as anyone knew, he had never "gotten serious" with anyone, but that was all, and no one pried. More than anything else, he seemed to prioritize his brother and the bar.

Especially after Kirk died.

The bar had been running for ten years, becoming exactly what he had hoped it would be, lively and safe. Kirk had successfully cultivated the atmosphere to make it so. He was that kind of guy, with a glow and energy that drew people in and inspired them, the kind that made people say, "Everyone loves him".

Now they said, "Everyone loved him".

It was cancer.

At age fifty-one, decades of smoking had caught up with him.

He didn't get treatment, no matter how many people wanted him too. He let the cancer run its course so that Kim could get the life insurance money—which she specifically told him wasn't more important than he was, but he just didn't want to deal with all the hospitalization, no matter how ugly his deterioration got.

When he died, the shockwave rippled widely to everyone who had ever met him. For a while, the bar was full of people who came to honor him, say their goodbyes and thank yous, and performers who paid tributes to him.

As for Mike, he made it a policy that the bar would be a no-smoking zone from now on, and no one argued. It was his bar now, his and Kim's. Kirk had signed it over to them before the sickness took him, and they clung to it. For them, it was the continuation of Kirk's life and his love for people. While Mike eventually became the bar's face, to Mike himself, Crooked Lines was always Kirk's.

Zoe had gotten her job there while in undergrad—without even applying. She had just bodily dragged someone who had been causing trouble out the door, and Kirk had asked if she was interested in a position. Because while most people cooperated in keeping the space peaceful, there were always a lot of new kids coming into the college town who didn't know the respect the place had established. She had only known Kirk for a few months before he died, but it had quickly become like a second home to her. And still now, she liked doing her part to preserve its living legacy, along with Mike and Kim.

Not to mention she found the art of bartending a fun way to relax after studying—while also having the perk of getting paid.

As she, Cory, and Ae walked around the campus in the chilly February dusk, she thought about how she probably never would have met them if it hadn't been for the weekly nights the bar had that were open to underage patrons. It had been part of Kirk's vision of creating a space safe for *everyone*. Teens deserved to be part of the community too, not constantly treated like a completely different species. Because of that, Cory had been able to play on the stage, and everything just came together from that.

The three of them didn't talk the whole time, since Zoe knew Cory wasn't used to extended socialization, but she was glad Cory could be somewhat comfortable spending time with her. Then during their second lap around the trail, Zoe's mind hit upon a new topic.

"So, this may be a stupid question," she opened conversationally, "but have you made any love songs?"

Cory's brows knit tight as he turned his head to give her a look.

It made Zoe laugh.

"That's an 'are you kidding me?' face."

"Why would you ask *me* that?"

"Oh, I just was thinking ahead for Aki's birthday, and I suddenly thought it would be really amazing, you know, special really, to have a song made just for her. It's random, I know. And I know you making an even remotely happy song is a long shot, but I figured I'd ask. Just in case."

"Well . . ."

Deep in his jacket pockets, Cory squeezed his hands in pulses. Zoe looked at him curiously.

"Hm?"

He glanced at Ae for a few steps, then directed his eyes to the sidewalk.

"I mean," he mumbled, "I have written *one* . . . kind of happy song, I guess."

She with quick interest. "Oh yeah?"

"N . . . Yeah . . ."

"Why're you acting embarrassed about it?"

He shuffled his shoulders while keeping his eyes forward.

"I dunno. It just feels weird to say, I guess. I'm not a happy person, so . . ."

“Well if you build your whole identity around not being happy, you’re going to make it difficult to let yourself ever be happy if things change. Is that what you want?”

“It’s not like I don’t want to be happy at *all*. I can be happy. Just . . . not out here.”

“Being happy isn’t cool enough for you?” she teased with an elbow to xir arm.

Xe shot her a light scowl.

“No one thinks I’m cool,” xe corrected, then xe shrugged noncommittally. “I don’t know. I think being happy is a private thing for me. There’s nothing out here to be happy about. I’m only happy when . . .” Xe glanced sideways at Ae. “I just don’t feel like showing anyone else when I’m happy. It’s private.”

“Ok. That’s fine, you do you. But now I’m curious about this *song*. Is it super private too, or would you ever play it for an audience?”

Cory stared hard at the sidewalk as it slid by beneath xem. Xir feet seemed detached, like xe was seeing them on a screen, each one coming in then going out of view with each step. They detached more as xir mind drifted into the song.

Maybe “happy” was the wrong word.

On its own, the guitar sounded like mourning. Cory couldn’t help that xe preferred minor key. Gloom and darkness were always better than bright colors and cheerful chords. It was the words that made it . . . *positive*, xe supposed.

I was alone, so alone,

Alone for the longest time

Didn’t know I was lonely until

You made me feel all right

Xe had composed it within a week of meeting Ae. It came in the same rush as several other songs, but while those had already been waiting to be born for some time, this one was

newly conceived. The others had been vague in Cory's mind, dim essences waiting to be given form and structure, and xe had spent months trying to do so before Ae's influence unlocked the missing inspiration. *This* song, though. *This* one hadn't even been a whisper in Cory's soul until Ae appeared. It existed because of em, and xe performed it for em.

I lock everyone, my walls are high

It could only be you that got inside

Xe played it on xir guitar and sang the words with xir voice, but Ae could feel more than that. Xir soul was literally in the song, expanding every guitar string into an orchestra, every note into an ocean wave. Within the depth of it, Ae felt small and overwhelmed. What a beautiful feeling it was to drown in such magnificence. The whole of the Infinite couldn't compare.

I like how you fill me up and find

So many parts of me I never knew

I swear someday I'll find the way

To leave this worthless world with you

Feeling Ae's response immediately as xe played only increased xir enthusiasm. And that connection was the whole point of the song. It wouldn't work right played for anyone else. There was no one else for Cory to sing it to. It would still be a good song, but it was supposed to be more than that.

"It's pretty private," xe answered.

"Mm. All right," Zoe said easily. "Never mind then."

"But . . . I mean . . . I don't know, maybe I could . . . come up with something. For you and Aki."

Zoe gave xem a big grin.

“You know what? The fact that you even said that makes me feel so special. Damn. Now I’m really happy.”

Cory didn’t have a reply to that, so xe just kept walking with xir hands bundled tight, hidden in xir pockets to clench down the awkwardness.

“I don’t even care if you don’t do it,” Zoe continued. “Seriously, there’s absolutely no pressure at all. I’m thrilled you’d even offer. I mean *damn*.”

She really was grinning, and it was so big it made Cory shrink xir shoulders, like a plant shriveled by too much sun. And yet, part of xem felt it was nice to be appreciated. Xe didn’t know for sure if xe could do it, but . . . xe liked her enough xe didn’t mind trying.

Next to xem, Ae glided along the sidewalk in body and soul, vibrating with the conviction that Cory could create any musical masterpiece xe had xir heart in, while also enjoying the subtle stares and glances from anyone who passed by. Ae had developed a particular fancy for the taste of surprise and curiosity, and out in the open, there was never a shortage of it.

Even at Mike’s that night, there were still new people for Ae to taste, and e and Cory let the energy of the space distract them from other pressing issues. People-watching was one of those things that helped Cory forget that xe xemself was a person too. It made xem feel closer to floating pair of eyes attached to nothing. The more there was to see, the less of xemself there was to think about.

When xe and Ae decided to leave around midnight, xe was glad xe had come.

The week went by after that.

It was busier than usual, so it passed faster too. Zach had managed to get the band booked at a new place each night Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, and then Thursday was back at Mike’s. Cory didn’t mind the extra work. Actually, it made for a good distraction from the bad

mood that had struck xem earlier. The more xe threw xemself into the music, the less chance xe had of falling back down into the numb. Xe forced xemself to feel by avoiding the one thing that emptied xem. Xe sang about all the things that made xem angry and frustrated, the things that hurt, the things that triggered a response, a retaliation. The loud music swallowed xir body whole while xir soul kept amping up, and xe burned in the fire of the blurring vibrations. Xe couldn't tell where xir skin stopped and the air began.

And that was the best part.

The fuller the music got, the more xe lost track of xir body. It became pure sensation. Vibrations, vibrations resounding and radiating, turning organs to speakers, bones and muscle to electrical wires. Xe was the music, the very waves filling the room pushing against the walls. Xe was the scream that wrapped around every person's heart and squeezed tight.

When the performances ended and it all receded, xe tried to ignore xir disappointment. Xe just couldn't help hoping that eventually, xe would finally go so far in one performance that xe would break the limits of xir body and find that xe had evolved into xir true form. Xir voice would go out, but the song would still be there, a soul no longer anchored down by an unnecessary vestige, which had simply unraveled.

But apparently the performances so far weren't enough to cause that transformation.

Humans' bodies were like batteries for their souls. The heart and the brain provided their life and consciousness, constantly, and when the body died, the soul lost the source of its life. For a being born human—a combination of body and soul—to become like Ae, the soul needed to become its own power source. But Ae didn't know how to make that happen, and Cory didn't either. Xe just kept hoping that if xe poured everything xe had into the music—the songs that manifested pieces of xir soul in the world—then that would do it.

It felt close. It always felt *so close*.

But xe was missing something. Whatever that final key was, xe hoped Ae would figure it out. Maybe *Ae* didn't care if xe got old, but Cory didn't want too much more time to pass and wear xem down. The years felt enormous and fast at the same time, enough to overwhelm Cory anytime xir mind drifted toward the thought. This week though, there was a more immediate concern making decent competition for xir attention.

Friday morning, they decided Ae would give the story that Cory had brought Ae home with xem, that way they wouldn't have to come up with any other explanation for how e got there. It would also guarantee that Cory had a legitimate reason to leave if things got to be more than xe could handle. Then when they left together, they would have some time away and alone to decompress.

But that also meant more time before the dinner started for Cory's parents to interact with Ae. And since they had both been weird the last time xe had been with either of them, Cory wasn't sure what to expect.

And that in itself was weird, since it meant, somehow, a part of xem had some modicum of hope that it could possibly go well. Where the fuck had *that* come from? Xe had no idea. That should have been stamped out long ago. Something had to be wrong with xem.

Well, whatever. Whatever happened, happened.

The family dinner meant that Cory wasn't going to be able to keep Vio late, as had become the usual. But Aki and Zoe had both said it was fine.

"It works out, actually," Zoe had said. "My schedule got shuffled a bit, so I'm going to be working Friday night to cover for someone else, and my Thursday evening appointment rescheduled for Friday morning, so Aki and I can hang out Thursday night this week and we'll keep Vio with us Friday."

"I need to be home by ten-thirty," Vio reminded automatically.

“We know, don’t worry,” Zoe reassured. “Aki can take you home.”

Aki nodded to confirm, and Vio went quiet, satisfied.

When school ended, Cory made xir way leisurely to the front doors, letting the rushing crowd go out first while xe hung back to avoid unnecessary human contact. When there was an opening, xe slipped out and claimed a spot against the face of the building. It was mild for February, in the mid-forties, and that was fine with Cory. Snow and ice turned drivers into morons. Dangerous morons.

Eventually Vio appeared and they walked together to xir car. Cory tossed xir backpack carelessly into the backseat, where Ae materialized out of thickening threads of smoke, while Vio hugged his own backpack close against himself and squeezed the Hello Kitty plush in one hand.

“I want a ghost friend,” Vio said as soon as Cory shut xir door.

Cory stopped xir flow of movement and turned to look at him

“What?”

“A ghost friend,” Vio repeated, staring straight ahead through the windshield. “I want a ghost for a friend. I think that would be ideal.”

Cory stared at Vio for a full three seconds before turning back to putting xir key in the ignition.

“What brought *that* up?”

“I’ve just been thinking about it,” Vio said as the engine rumbled to life. “Aki and Zoe like to hug each other. Sometimes I feel like I want a hug, or something like that. But then not really. It’s hard to explain. I see Aki and Zoe being close with each other, and it seems nice, but only from the outside. Sometimes I think about the *idea* of being hugged, but it’s only nice in my imagination. The instant it gets close to being real, it’s horrible. I feel sick. So I was thinking, if I

had a ghost friend, they could get close and hug me, and it would be ok. It wouldn't feel bad the way it does with physical people. Or!" he said with sudden enthusiasm. "Maybe *I* should be the ghost! Yeah, that would be great too."

Cory was rolling slowly down the lane to get out of the parking lot and into the street, and at the intersection, as xe peered over the steering wheel toward the oncoming traffic, xe said, "I don't know about *you* becoming a ghost, but you've always got Ae to test out the ghost friend idea with."

Vio turned in his set to look at Ae.

"You mean, because of the soul?"

"I was thinking more like, Ae making their body visible but not physical, like a ghost."

Vio's eyes widened.

"You can do that?"

Ae's lips spread into a wide grin, and eir teeth seemed extra white against eir black skin.

"It would be simple enough." E could do it by turning eir body into light waves rather than waves of matter. The shape and color wouldn't change, but with no mass, there would be nothing for Vio to feel when they touched. Vio's palpable enthusiasm convinced Ae to say, "We can try it sometime."

Vio answered with a smile and a nod.

It probably wasn't going to be today since they were headed down the street to the university library, but there was no reason it couldn't be soon.

They all entered the library and signed in at the front desk as guests, then sat down at a table to wait for Aki to show up. They knew it would be a while since she had class, so Cory pulled out some homework that xe could give the barest amount of attention to. Vio pulled out some math to work on, since the quiet here was what he needed to be able to focus on it. Once he

got to Mike's, the noise would distract him from everything except drawing. Across from Cory, Ae sat in the wide wooden chair with eir legs pulled up and ankles crossed and went very still, as if meditating.

Cory knew better.

Ae was exploring the room again with curious tongues, and being very careful not to brush against Cory so that xe could keep xir mind on the French grammar and vocabulary exercises.

But Cory reached out to Ae.

//Hey,// he called, sending a wave of xir soul into Ae.

Ae's eyes and soul turned attentively to xem

//Do you know French?//

//No. I've absorbed English from you, Spanish from Vio, and Japanese from Aki, but no French. I can look around and see if anyone here knows it.//

//Would you mind?//

//Not at all.//

Ae's body held very still in the chair while the rest of em spread out and dipped deeper into the pools of people's souls. Usually Ae was satisfied just tasting the outer layers, where the basic essence of a person radiated out to form an aura, and just under that where e could taste the most conscious thoughts and feelings, what a person was thinking at the exact moment. But further in than that, Ae could find memories, values and morals, long-term beliefs and opinions out of which bubbled up the momentary thoughts. And within that thick morass was language.

Ae found a few different languages from the people in the library, some from students who had come from abroad, some from students who spoke a different language at home with

their family, and some from students who had learned another language through studies. A collection from around the world.

And French was among them.

A few different students had French sewn into the composition of their souls, and Ae absorbed it all. Ae could tell it wasn't all the same though. There were inconsistencies in some of the word meanings and speech patterns, but since Ae didn't know which version Cory needed, e just gave them all together, carrying the threads into Cory's soul and sewing them in. Instantly, Cory saw French in xir book and understood it. It wasn't just a matter of translating, of feeling the English equivalent coexist in xir mind so that when one was invoked, the other appeared. Xe understood the French on its own, without needing an intermediary.

Well shit, why hadn't xe asked about that earlier? The class was going to be much easier now.

Xe had switched to algebra by the time Aki came walking up behind xem.

"Look at *you*," she said, putting a hand on one of xir shoulders and leaning over the other. "I don't think I've ever seen you actually doing homework."

Xe glanced sideways at her then closed the textbook with a piece of paper stuck inside.

"No reason you would have."

"Why? You don't do it?"

"I just do however much it takes to pass." It wasn't like xe was looking to get held back.

"I see. What about tests? Do you ever study for those?"

Cory shrugged. "A little. If I have to. Most things I pick up enough just from class."

"Don't you sleep in class?"

"Not for real. You can't get comfortable enough in a desk to actually sleep. I just pretend so no one bothers me."

“Ah, gotcha. I guess that’s been working out for you so far?”

“So far.”

“Hmm.” She turned to Vio as Cory stuffed the book into his bag. “Hey, Vio? You about ready to go?”

Vio nodded without looking up from the problem he was solving. “Mm-hmm.”

Aki didn’t rush him and let him finish out the steps in his geometry. She looked across the table to see Ae in the same position he had settled into when they had arrived, with ankles crossed, bent legs leaning against the arms of the chair, and a hand crowning each knee. Ae directed his gold eyes toward Aki and smiled.

Aki took the empty seat next to Cory.

“So, you ready for your family dinner?”

Cory sighed and shrugged.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to be ready *for*. I have no idea what’s gonna happen with Ae there.”

“So are you nervous? Or, excited?”

“I don’t know. I think at *most* I’m curious, but other than that?” He shrugged.

“Hm. Well, I hope it works out in a way you like.” She looked across the Ae again. “And I hope you enjoy it.”

“I plan to,” Ae said pleasantly. “And I hope you enjoy your evening.”

“Oh it’ll be a long night, but Friday night crowds are always really energetic, so they’ll keep us awake and keep it interesting.”

“I need to be home by ten-thirty,” Vio reminded, again, while zipping up his packed bag.

“I know,” Aki said with a smile. She wasn’t even being patient, since exercising patience was a response to a testing situation. She just genuinely didn’t mind any of Vio’s quirks. “We’ll leave to get you home in plenty of time.”

Vio pulled his backpack onto his shoulders while Cory slung xirs over one. Ae simultaneously lifted eir legs out straight over the table while pushing on the armrests to lift emself up from eir seat. When e was high enough, e pushed emself forward across the table until e landed on eir feet among the rest. Vio looked around quickly to see if anyone was eyeing Ae judgmentally, but no one seemed to notice their little group at all.

They left together, then split into pairs when Aki indicated her car was in a different direction.

“Well, see you later,” she said to Cory and Aki. “Have a good weekend.”

“Yeah, you too,” Cory said, one hand in xir jacket pocket and the other holding onto the strap at xir shoulder.

“Thanks.”

They all waved and parted, Aki and Vio off to meet Zoe and probably eat before heading to Mike’s, Cory and Ae to act as if Ae had never been to xir house before.

By the time they were heading that way, the traffic had gotten heavy with people leaving work and others beginning their Friday night out. Cory didn’t mind the delay, so xe didn’t fight it. Xe used the time to focus on the radio music instead of the unknown that awaited back home.

When xe pulled into xir spot under the garage connection, xe felt surprisingly blank. Which was an improvement over the usual repugnance that came every time xe had to deal with xir family gathered in one place.

“Ok,” xe sighed, leaning xir head back against the seat. “Here we go.” Xe twisted around to reach into the back and pull up xir backpack. Xe set it in xir lap, looked to xir side toward Ae,

and after a moment of mental preparation, he pushed his way out the door and slung the bag over one shoulder. Ae, for a change, opened the door and stepped out with his form kept solid and whole.

Cory walked up to the back door first, entering into the kitchen with Ae a step behind. Carolyn was there at the oven with another woman who was only a few years older. It was Joyce, a professional caterer that Carolyn hired every time they hosted the family dinner, because she had never gotten around to learning how to cook well enough to trust that she could prepare and present a meal that her sister-in-law couldn't find fault with. And she was sure Tracy didn't know about it because if she did, she absolutely would have brought it up—with hostility sheathed in fake pleasantries.

Cory wasn't even sure what the rivalry was about, except that they both had strong personalities that inevitably made them compete with each other. It had been that way as long as he could remember. Which meant Carolyn couldn't risk any mistakes and was why she had been bringing in Joyce to cook ever since the dinners had started, around ten years ago when Christopher had convinced his brother Richard to accept a position in his company and move into a house just a few lanes away. Cory had always resented that, since the three sons Richard and Tracy had brought with them in the move had only ever been trouble for him.

Both Carolyn and Joyce looked up from the oven as Cory walked in. It was like stepping into a different climate zone separated by a very distinct wall, with cool and dry air on the outside and the inside thick with warmth and a whirl of smells. Carolyn straightened up with a smile.

*“There he is!”* she said enthusiastically.

Which sent nine-inch nails scraping down xir back. But xe ground xir teeth hard and bore it. Xe nodded a greeting to Joyce who waved at him. She wouldn't be here for much longer. It was important—*critical*—that she left before the other family members were scheduled to arrive.

Carolyn rounded the kitchen island and glided toward Cory with arms outstretched. Xe resisted the sudden urge to step backwards and just accepted it when she grabbed xir shoulders affectionately and then pat xir cheeks with both hands.

“How was your day?”

Her makeup and hair were flawless, and she wore an outfit that looked like a design cross between a form-fitting dress and a women's business suit, which took on a shade of luxury paired with her diamond earrings.

Cory shrugged.

“It was a day.”

Carolyn smiled and then looked past Cory's shoulder.

Her eyebrows quickly rose halfway up her forehead.

“Oh wow,” were the first words out of her mouth upon seeing Ae, who responded with a smile that was somewhere between polite and amused.

And then she remembered herself and composed her expression into her professional persona, friendly and delightful.

“He-*llo*. You must be Ae, right?” she asked as Cory stepped out of the way to let them meet face to face.

“That's right,” Ae said, stepping forward in eir biker boots, slim black jeans, and oversized black denim jacket. “Very nice to meet you, Mrs. Rhys.”

Carolyn met Ae's extended hand with both of her own.

“And I'm so happy to meet you too. Feel free to call me Carolyn.”

“You’re very kind, thank you. And you have a beautiful home.”

“Well thank you. We’re very happy here. Please, come in. Have a look around. Cory can show you everything. Dinner won’t be for another half an hour. Are you hungry?”

“No. But I never am. And I’m happy to join you anyway.”

“Oh, well that’s good,” she said with almost no break in her smile. Then turning to Cory, she asked, “How about you? You hungry?”

Cory shrugged.

“Not really.”

Xir stomach had already begun to churn when xe had stepped into the pillowy air. Cory wasn’t a food connoisseur, so xe wasn’t sure what all xe was smelling, but none of it appealed much. The main dish would be some kind of meat oozing its own bodily fluids, and the side dishes would certainly be coated in some other kind of bodily secretion. That was all he had come to think of things like cheese, butter, and creamy dressings. Not food, just the collected discharge of an animal’s glands. Rather than pique Cory’s appetite, the sight of melted cheese sweating grease and stretching like goo nauseated xem. But xe hadn’t said anything about it, because if xe rejected the food Carolyn had prepared, she would see xem as a traitor. At these dinners, xe was supposed to be on *her* side. Suffering the nausea for a few hours was better than summoning Carolyn’s wrath, especially since it was just one meal a month that xe couldn’t decide for xemself.

Carolyn seemed to take xir comment as if xe was teasing her and lightly swatted xir forehead with her flat fingers.

“Ok, you can go show Ae around a little while I get the last details from Joyce before she takes off.”

“Sure,” Cory said, choosing to ignore the tingle on xir forehead. It wasn’t because the tap had hurt, it had just been noticeably *weird*. As xe led Ae out of the kitchen and into the living room, he heard Carolyn ask Joyce, “So, just leave this in there for another thirty minutes?”

“That’s right . . .”

Cory and Ae went up to xir room without speaking. Cory dropped off xir backpack and traded xir heavier biker jacket for a more comfortable oversized black flannel shirt. And just for fun, xe went to the bathroom and drew thick borders around xir eyes. Dramatic. Xe liked it.

They took their time going back downstairs since Carolyn seemed to be expecting Cory to give Ae some kind of tour, but they spent most of it standing at the balustrade, overlooking the front entrance and listening to music in their own heads.

“Cory!” they heard Carolyn call after a few minutes. “Your dad’s home! Come back so he can meet Ae!”

Cory exhaled then pushed xemself off the top rail, and xe and Ae strolled down the stairs back to the kitchen. When they got there, Carolyn and Christopher were talking quietly, and Joyce was gone. When they noticed Cory and Ae appear through the entryway, they both turned and smiled graciously.

“So you’re Ae,” Christopher said, reaching out a hand to Ae.

Ae took it with a pleasant smile of eir own.

“Yes I am.”

“It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Thank you so much for having me over.”

“We’re happy to have you. Can we get you something to drink? We have wine,” he offered, pointing to a collection arranged neatly against the wall in wrought iron loops.

“Thank you, but I’m fine. I don’t drink.”

“Oh really?” Christopher asked while pondering the options to pick something for himself and Carolyn. As he did, Carolyn took the opportunity to look Ae up and down, then asked, “How old are you, by the way?”

Christopher pulled out a bottle and brought it to the island.

“It’s hard to say,” Ae answered easily.

Both Carolyn and Christopher gave curious looks.

“Why’s that?”

“A few reasons. But I guess the main one is I was never born, so I can’t measure something that has no beginning.”

While Christopher was working on opening the bottle, he and Carolyn exchanged glances. Ae was so matter-of-fact, they couldn’t tell if e was joking with some bizarre story they didn’t understand, or if it was something e actually believed. When they looked back at Ae, e looked like e didn’t think e had said anything strange at all. They looked at Cory for a clue, but they had already missed the twitch in xir lips when xe suppressed xir laughter. To them, xe looked impassive.

“What does that mean?” Carolyn finally asked conversationally.

“Just that I don’t recall a moment when I first began to exist, so I don’t know that I ever *didn’t* exist.”

As Christopher began to pour the wine into two glasses, he asked, “Is that a . . . religious thing?”

He handed one of the glasses to Carolyn.

“No, I don’t have anything like a religion.”

They looked at Ae with more confusion than they were voicing.

“Hmm,” Carolyn hummed diplomatically. “Well I don’t really understand, but . . .”

Ae smiled.

“That’s ok.”

Cory knew e could have gone further in eir explanation, but xe also knew Ae liked to project a cryptic image. E liked confusing people. E found it entertaining. So Cory didn’t offer any details either.

“Well, do you like lasagna?” Carolyn asked, cheerfully changing the subject. “It’s made from scratch and it’s got a mix of vegetables in it too.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had any before.”

“You’ve never had lasagna?” she asked with some shock.

“No.”

“Oh, I’m *sure* you’ll love it. It’s absolutely beautiful, and I’ve got salad and garlic bread to go with it. I thought we could have something warm and comforting for a cold day like this.”

“I’m looking forward to trying it.”

Cory would have enjoyed the next ten minutes of awkward interaction more if xe still wasn’t so confused by their hospitality. Xe was replaying the usual procedure in xir mind, Carolyn bustling around the kitchen and dining room and living room, making sure everything was spotless and perfectly ordered and that the food was progressing according to Joyce’s instructions. She snapped at any interruption and hissed curses to herself at any inconvenience and radiated a strong warning signal in her aura that Cory and Christopher should either help or stay the hell out of her way. Only when the doorbell rang did she straighten her clothes and conjure a composed expression in place of the concentrated frown.

Well, this was what happened with an audience. With a new pair of eyes, their private lives got shut up in a hidden basement so deep not even the faintest heartbeat of truth could rise through the floorboards.

When the doorbell rang, Carolyn looked up at the timer and saw that there was fifteen minutes left to go. She turned to Christopher while taking a quick sip of wine.

“Can you get the door? I’ve got to get the bread in the oven.”

“Sure.”

Christopher put his glass down and passed Cory on his way to the front door. Carolyn grabbed the tray that the sliced bread was spread neatly on and slid it gently into the oven. Cory could see the heat blow against her face as she opened and closed the door.

“Oh-*kay*,” she said to herself, “that’s in there. So now . . . salad.”

She opened the fridge and pulled out a big glass bowl full of greens and set it on the island. Cory could hear the sound of new voices as Christopher welcomed his brother and the rest into the house. Carolyn gathered together tomatoes, parmesan, fancy bottles of dressing, and a big wood bowl with a matching server set. She had dumped the greens from one bowl into another and was getting ready to cut tomatoes when Christopher reappeared, guiding the others.

“He-*llo!*” Carolyn greeted to Richard while slicing a tomato in half. “How *are* you?”

“I’m fine. It’s been a long week.”

“I see. Well I—”

“SHIT!”

Everyone jumped at the sudden outburst, turning to see that Bryce had leapt five feet backwards from the kitchen. “What the *fuck!*” he screamed. “NO! Fucking . . . *NO!*”

“Bryce!” Tracy shouted with eyes wide from horrified embarrassment. “What in *god’s* name is wrong with you?”

“Why is *that* here?” he demanded, pointing at Ae with a shaking hand. As he looked back and forth from Ae to Cory, everyone else’s eyes moved from Bryce to Ae and back to Bryce.

“*Bryce!*” Tracy hissed, and with everyone attention occupied, Ae let eir lips spread into a reptilian smile so wide, the corners reached eir ears.

Bryce’s eyes went round as golf balls.

“SHIT!” he screamed, hopping back another step. “NO! I am *not* staying here with that thing!”

“Bryce! I swear to *fucking* god, if you don’t stop embarrassing me I’m going to throw you out myself. What the *fuck* is wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with *me*? Just *fucking look* at it! That thing’s not right! It shouldn’t be here! Why the *fuck* is it here?”

Both Tracy and Richard looked to Ae with bewildered apology. By then, of course, e had retracted eir smile into something human. Carolyn and Christopher also looked around at a complete loss, while Lance and Hunter looked desperate to disassociate from him.

For the first time, Cory finally felt like xe was having fun.

Tracy turned to Bryce with murder in her eyes.

“Outside. Now.”

She grabbed Bryce by the neck, her red stiletto nails pricking into his skin, and dragged him out of sight. When they all heard the front door open and close, there was an awkward silence in its wake—just before they heard Tracy begin to rip into Bryce from outside.

Richard broke the tension in the room first. Well, the tension that everyone except Ae and Cory felt.

“I am *so* sorry,” he said helplessly to Ae. “I don’t know what he was thinking. He’s never done something like that before.”

Ae shook eir head and smiled graciously.

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t mind at all.”

“But, have you even *met* before?” Carolyn asked.

“Once. I don’t think I made a very good impression.”

“Well, that’s no excuse,” Richard said. “I’ve never seen him like that.”

While Richard was being diplomatic, Lance and Hunter were silently eyeing Ae and Cory with suspicion. Cory smiled back with a dare to test em.

“I don’t want to hear it!”

Tracy’s muffled scream was loud enough that the words came through the walls intact.

“Well please don’t be concerned for me,” Ae said smoothly. “I’m not bothered.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that, but still, I’m very sorry.”

“You’re very considerate.”

“I’m Richard, by the way,” he said, coming forward and reaching out a hand.

“I’m Ae,” e said, accepting it with eir own. “Nice to meet you.”

“Ae? It’s very nice to meet you too.”

“Get your ass in there and act fucking *normal*! Or I swear to god, I will *kill* you, you understand me?”

Everyone pretended to not hear. Carolyn was already back to cutting tomatoes, and Christopher picked up the bottle of wine.

“Can I pour anyone a drink?”

“Yes, please,” Richard said heavily.

“And you two?” he asked, looking up at Lance and Hunter.

“Sure,” they said one after another.

Christopher went to pull out more glasses from the cabinet when they heard the front door open and close again. Tracy appeared first, her cheeks pink but her hair and outfit all

freshly smoothed down. Seeing Christopher pulling out glasses, she answered before he could ask, "I'll take a drink, please."

"Sure thing."

Tracy swept past her sons and husband to step right up to Ae so she could grab one of eir hands with both of hers.

"I am so. *So* sorry," she said emphatically. "I swear he won't say anything like that again."

Ae smiled again and laid eir free hand on top of Tracy's.

"You're very kind. I've already told Richard it doesn't bother me, so please don't stress."

She sighed and shook her head.

"I swear, he's usually the charming one of the family. I don't know what's gotten into him."

"It's all right. Really."

Cory could feel the shimmer of laughter in Ae's soul. Oh yes, e knew all about Bryce's charms.

As Christopher began pouring wine into each glass, Tracy said, "A little more for me, please, Christopher."

"Sure. Let me get another bottle. Any preference?"

"Any merlot you have."

"Ok."

While he was browsing the collection, Bryce tried to sneak into the kitchen, or at least he looked like it. His eyes were sharp and his movement stiff. Lance noticed him while he sipped at his glass of wine and went toward him.

“Dude, what the fuck is wrong with you?” he hissed when he got close, but Bryce shooped him off before charging directly toward Cory.

Cory thought to say something snarky, but Bryce beat xem with a very intense glare.

“I need to *talk* to you.”

Cory thought that if xe drank, xe could have eyed Bryce gleefully over xir glass as xe took a long sip of wine. But xe was fine with just raising an eyebrow.

“*Do* you now?”

“Yeah. Right now.”

“Hm. Ok, sure. I’m listening.”

“Not *here* you fucking asshole.”

“Ohh, you want to talk *privately*. No problem. Lead the way.”

Bryce’s jaw and lips were tight, and when he glanced past Cory’s shoulder to Ae, who had a serene expression as e looked back at him, he swallowed hard and looked determined not to blink until he had turned around. From there, he took very controlled but quick steps to leave the kitchen. Cory gave Ae a smirk before following at a leisurely pace. Xe followed Bryce up the stairs and to the farthest wall of the game room, where Bryce waited for xem, shaking and shifting like a paranoid madman.

“Ok seriously,” Bryce hissed quickly when Cory was finally standing in front of him.

“What the *fuck* is that thing doing here?”

“It’s having dinner with us.”

“But *why*?”

“Mom wanted to meet Ae.”

“You can do that any fucking time. You planned this. You *deliberately* waited until *now* to bring it here because you *knew* . . .”

He seemed reluctant to finish whatever sentence he had in mind, so he crushed it to silence in his grinding teeth.

“Maybe,” Cory said with a shrug.

“You *fucking*—”

“Hey,” Cory cut in. “You’re the only one making this a big deal. You really think Ae’s gonna eat you right here in front of everyone?”

“What’s *stopping* it? A thing like that could get away with anything, right?”

“Dude,” Cory said flatly. “In case you haven’t noticed, Ae’s here pretending to be human. So this is going to be as normal or as crazy as *you* make it.”

Bryce’s nostrils flared under his enlarged eyes. He lowered his voice to a secretive whisper to ask, “Do you know what it did to me?”

Cory shrugged.

“I mean, I know what *happened*, but I wouldn’t say Ae actually did anything *to* you.”

Bryce wrinkled his nose furiously but didn’t press the point.

“Seriously, what the fuck is that *thing*? Is it an alien? Or like . . .”

“Like, what? A demon?”

“*Is* it?”

Cory sighed.

“If you’re looking for a word, I don’t think we have one. Ae’s just Ae, whatever that is.”

“How is it fucking *possible* that something like that exists?”

“Are you kidding me? Man, we don’t know *shit* about this universe. Based on how little we know, *anything* is possible.”

“Why is it *here*? With *you*?”

“I got lucky.”

“Holy shit,” Bryce said with brows high. “Are you two *fucking*?”

Cory’s face crinkled in almost pained confusion.

“*What?*”

“Are you *fucking* that thing?”

“Fucking Christ, are you serious? *No*. And not that it’s any of your goddamn business, but I’ve never fucked anyone and I’ve never *wanted* to fuck anyone. At all. Ever.”

Bryce gave him a skeptical look, but after considering *xem* for a moment, he seemed to think it might actually be true, and his face showed that he didn’t know which option made Cory more of a freak: fucking a demon-alien or not wanting to fuck at all.

“How the fuck can you not want sex? Is there something wrong with you? I mean, something *else* we didn’t already know about?”

Cory rolled his eyes so hard that for a moment, only the whites were visible.

“I’m serious,” Bryce insisted. “*Everyone* wants sex. Everyone likes sex. It’s the best feeling in the world.”

Cory snorted.

“It’s funny you don’t realize how pathetic that sounds.”

“*You’re* pathetic. You’re always so broody and serious and your only friend *ever* is some freaky . . . *thing*. You’d never be able to get someone to sleep with you even if you wanted.”

“Well since I *don’t* want to, I don’t see that as a problem.”

“No, I bet you’ve got something wrong going on. I bet you need medicine or something because that’s not natural. Or maybe *you’re* not human either.”

Cory made a derisive sound.

“Like I’m going to take medical advice from *you*. But besides that, who the fuck ever said I wanted to be human anyway? It’s not exactly an honor to be the same species as *you*.”

Bryce squinted his eyes and made a sarcastic expression. But since he didn't say anything, Cory was able to continue.

“Look, I've just never wanted sex, all right? And I've *never* felt like I was missing out on anything without it. Same with alcohol and smoking. I'm just not interested. And it's kinda sad you think you need all that to enjoy life.”

Xe didn't say that to mean xe had actually been enjoying life overall, but xe did mean that xe never thought sex of all things would have made life more enjoyable for xem. Xe knew what *would*, and it wasn't anything another human could provide.

Bryce was staring at Cory like he now thought his cousin was more bizarre than Ae. It made Cory feel good. Xe didn't want to be anything that Bryce was comfortable with.

And then Bryce got a serious look on his face and asked, “But like, you at least jerk off, right?”

Cory grimaced incredulously.

“What the fuck kind of question—”

“CORY! BRYCE! DINNER'S READY! WHERE ARE YOU?”

Cory's shoulders tensed involuntarily at the sound of xir mom's scream, but xe shook it off and answered with xir performance volume, “COMING!”

Then xe turned back to Bryce to give another disgusted look before saying flatly, just because an impulse arrived that made xem feel like it, “No. I don't.” Not intending to say more, xe walked away.

But Bryce was right behind xem.

“No'?” he repeated incredulously. “Like, *never*?”

“No. Never.”

“Bullshit.”

“You got proof or something?”

“I don’t need proof. It’s just not possible.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. Guess I’m just wired different.”

“You’re telling me you’ve *never* jacked off? Not even once?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Dude, how? What the fuck, that is *not natural*.”

“You’re really hung up on this, aren’t you?” Cory asked dismissively.

“It doesn’t make sense! It’s not right!”

“Yeah, well, that’s how I feel all the time, just about everyone else.”

“No wonder that thing doesn’t creep you out.”

“Exactly. Ae’s the only person that makes sense to me.”

“Do your *parents* know what it is?”

“No. Do you want to tell them?” Cory asked it like xe was offering him the chance.

Bryce made a snarling face. Of course he couldn’t just tell them. But keeping it to himself was obviously an uncomfortable burden. Cory could see it in his face.

Xe didn’t really feel anything about it. Xe might have enjoyed it if the whole thing didn’t seem so insignificant.

They got to the kitchen to find Tracy performing the role of helper to Carolyn, the two of them working together with glossy smiles to get everything on the table while Lance and Hunter hung back, trying to be subtle as they eyed their father and Christopher make conversation with Ae.

“Are you from the area?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m from anywhere,” Ae answered pleasantly.

“Do you travel a lot?”

“Not since I got here.”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“None, really.”

“Are you in school?”

“Sometimes. I visit the university library with Cory.”

“Cory goes to the *library*?” Christopher asked.

“Yes.”

“But, you’re saying you’re not a *student* there,” Richard asked for confirmation.

“That’s right.”

“So, what do you do?”

“I learn things. Listen to good music. Enjoy myself.”

“How do you make money?”

“I don’t.”

“Do your parents support you?”

“I don’t have parents.”

“Then how do you afford food and housing?”

“I don’t.”

“Then, how do you *live*?”

They had gone beyond friendly conversation. Now both men were personally invested in finding out answers.

“I just do. I don’t need the same things you do. You know, actually, I’ve always thought the design of human bodies was very odd. You have to eat and drink, for one thing, but you can’t eat just *anything*, you need to eat specific things with specific nutrients. And there are so many other things you have to do to maintain your health. Your bodies can adapt and push through

some less-than-optimal conditions, but it can only thrive in very specific and limited conditions. It's just . . . very inefficient.”

While the rest were either staring at Ae or passing odd glances to each other, like they were half-expecting a punch line to come out, Bryce spoke up from behind Cory.

“See?” he shouted. “I fucking *told* you! I told you it's not human!”

“Bryce! I swear to god, you need to stop that *right now*,” Tracy said through clenched teeth. Her eyes warned that the next time she had to pull him aside, his corpse would never be found.

Cory knew that the only reason Bryce didn't persist or just leave was because his mother was in control of all his money. At any moment, she could decide to dry up his funds, even stop paying his tuition. Making the bet that he could survive the night if he just dropped it, he went quiet and waited at the kitchen entrance to see where Ae sat at the table.

“So Cory,” Tracy said after setting the wood salad bowl on the table, “we didn't know you were bringing a friend to dinner.”

“Yeah,” xe answered while walking up to stand at Ae's side. “Sorry.”

“Oh it's *fine*,” she said in a tone xe assumed was meant to be reassuring, but which to him just sounded like affectation. “I just wasn't expecting it.”

“All right, come on. Everyone sit down,” Carolyn said, gesturing with her arms to corral everyone to the table. “And it's my fault,” she said to Tracy specifically. “I could have told you about it, but I just didn't get around to it.”

Tracy waved.

“No, no, it's fine, really. I'm actually glad to know Cory has a friend, especially one he doesn't mind bringing to something like this. None of my boys have ever even brought a girlfriend to dinner.”

Cory didn't think she gave a flying fuck if he had a friend, but at these dinners, her words were the most dressed-up part of her. They all sat down, and because there was an extra person, the chairs on one side were squeezed a little closer together to make room. Christopher sat at one end, Richard on his left and Carolyn to his right. Cory sat next to Carolyn, then came Ae, then Hunter, then Lance on the other end. Tracy was next to Richard, which meant the seat on her other side went to Bryce. Not nearly as far away as he had wanted. But he kept his mouth shut and sat down, forcing his eyes in any direction but Ae's—except for the occasions when he seemed to lose control and glanced his way against his will.

Ae sat perfectly still, with perfect posture, in a perfectly respectable pose, and smiled back at Bryce with a graceful ease that only unsettled him more.

They weren't the kind of family that bothered to say grace, so Carolyn began cutting into the steaming lasagna while encouraging everyone to get their salad and garlic bread. Cory reached up first and gripped some salad with the wood hands and filled his plate with it. As Ae went next, collecting a sample of salad, Carolyn asked, "So, Tracy, how are things going?"

"Oh, good. You know, it feels like Valentine's Day comes right after New Year's, so work has been so busy, but we're finally moving into the slower seasons, so I've felt like I can actually breathe this week."

"That's great."

Tracy managed a high-end jewelry store, so of course holidays drew in larger crowds. Tracy had started out as a model in her teens and had continued the work while in college. She had met Richard because they were both business majors in the same year, and through him met Christopher and Carolyn. While Tracy enjoyed modeling, she had wanted a career that gave her both more control and flexibility, and she made her way to jewelry by talking to designers at the sets. One jeweler eventually invited her to do some interning with her, and by the time Tracy had

had to step back from modeling because of her first pregnancy, she had settled on her new path. And the web of networking had let her glide right into the store here when the family had moved for Richard's job.

Cory didn't think it would have surprised anyone to hear that Tracy had been a model. Actually, Cory had been able to recognize from a young age that everyone in the family was attractive by social standards, but the association between these people and beauty didn't make beauty an appealing feature. Xe didn't know for sure if that was the root for why no one's physical appearance affected xir feelings toward them, or if it was a matter of xir nature, but in the end it didn't really matter. Either way, xe could only measure beauty by an external scale, not xir own assessment.

What xe *did* feel strongly about was the food. Xe watched Carolyn dig out a slab of lasagna from the glass pan and guide it over to Christopher's place. The cheese stretched and sagged and drooled over layers of meat crumbles and shriveled spinach as she tried to keep everything steady so the tomato sauce didn't drip out in a mess. Cory looked away when xe realized xir nose had wrinkled up. Xe tried to undo it, but even when xe smoothed out the disgust from xir face, xe couldn't do anything about xir tight stomach. Nausea had too hard a grip.

"You ready for some?" Carolyn asked.

"Sure," Cory managed to say without much tone.

So Carolyn shoveled out a piece for xem too and set it down on xir salad, since there was no open space for it.

"Ae? You want to hand me your plate?" she asked with an extended hand.

"Thank you."

Ae handed it to her, and Carolyn returned it with a neatly cut piece. She did the same for everyone until the pan was empty and finished with a satisfied smile. "Well that worked out

perfectly. And don't worry, I've got plenty of dessert. I know you two can eat a *lot*," she said, looking at the twins.

"Thanks Aunt Carolyn," Lance said before digging into the lasagna after already eating three pieces of garlic bread.

Bryce was less enthusiastic, but he made up for it with deliberation. He kept his face down toward his food and ate in a rhythm calculated to keep his eyes from wandering.

Cory was the opposite, eating while trying to put xir focus anywhere else. But none of the conversations were stimulating enough to hold xir attention. Talk about the four adults' work, xir three cousins' classes, how track was going for the twins, news stories that Cory knew nothing about. Xe couldn't even finish the lasagna because it felt like pure sludge in xir stomach. Xe looked at Ae while trying to hold it down.

*"So, can you actually eat anything?"* xe had asked earlier.

*"I guess that depends on how you define 'eat'."*

*"Ok. Well tell me your plan and I'll tell you if I think it fits the definition."*

*"I thought the easiest thing to do would be to put any food I'm given inside me and just hold it there until I can get a chance to get rid of it."*

*"Just hold it'."*

*"Yeah. It won't hurt anything to just let it sit inside me for a while."*

*"Will you be able to taste anything?"*

*"If I give myself that ability. I could copy the way your taste buds work, that way we would taste things the same way."*

*"I think you'd be better off not tasting anything. I wish I couldn't."*

Xe was also wishing right now, again, for the millionth time, that xe could reshape xir body like Ae. Erase the parts that xe didn't want and redesign things to be more reasonable. And then just completely unravel when xe didn't need to be around other people anymore.

Ae returned Cory's look. Eir plate was empty and e licked eir lips before drying them with a napkin.

//I'm going to be sick,// xe conveyed with tossing soul waves.

//What can I do to help?//

Cory shook xir head and picked up xir glass to sip at the water.

//I don't know. Probably nothing. I just want this shit out of me. God, it feels like toxic slime.//

“So Carolyn,” Tracy said cheerfully—with a threatening edge as she smiled over her interlocked fingers. “I’ve been wanting to ask all night. How’s therapy going?”

Cory sputtered the water in xir mouth at the same time that Richard gave his wife an incredulous look.

“Excuse me?” Carolyn answered with restraint making her lips tight.

“Tracy,” Richard hissed.

“Oh it’s just a friendly question,” Tracy answered breezily. “I think it’s *great* you’ve been doing that!”

“Chris, I’m so sorry,” Richard said, his aura gushing genuine embarrassment and regret. “I didn’t think she’d bring it up like that.”

“Why does she even *know* about it?” Christopher asked pointedly.

“I just told her about it. I wasn’t really thinking, we were just talking and it just came out.”

“Christopher,” Carolyn asked with an edge, “why did you tell *him* about it?”

Christopher's mouth opened with the look of a caught criminal.

"I just *did*," he said helplessly. "We were at work and I told him I was taking a long lunch, and he asked where I was going and I just said I was meeting you for therapy. But then I *told* him we weren't telling anyone about it," he added with a direct look at Richard.

"Hang on, hang on."

Cory waved his hands before leaning forward on the table to look down at both his parents. "Are you being serious right now? You two are going to *therapy*? For real?"

Carolyn began rubbing her temples with her fingertips.

"You didn't even tell your own *son* about it?" Tracy asked with the exaggerated shock of hearing juicy gossip. "My god, Carolyn, it's not something to be *embarrassed* about." But her tone and the way she emphasized the word showed how delightfully amusing she thought the whole thing was.

"I'm not embarrassed," Carolyn snapped. "I just didn't feel like making a big *show* of it. It's *personal*, not something I want *you* stuffing your nose into."

"Carolyn, really, I'm so sorry," Richard said again.

"Don't apologize," Tracy said with a smile. "Carolyn's taking this too seriously. I'm not trying to be a bitch about it. I'm just curious, that's all."

"Since when have you ever needed to *try* to be a bitch?"

"OH-kay," Christopher said loudly as all of Tracy's sons raised their eyebrows high.

"This is too much. Let's just drop—"

"Oh *you're* one to talk," Tracy cut in, her smile turning into a sneer. "You're the one who has to try to *not* be a bitch. Seriously, I'm *thrilled* you're finally getting some help for all that crazy shit you've got going on in your head. I'm surprised Christopher didn't drag you into therapy *years* ago."

“Tra—!”

“Shut the *fuck up* Tracy,” Christopher ordered with a sudden glare. “Don’t act like you know a goddamn thing about it.”

“What,” Tracy countered viciously, “you think I actually believe this whole angel bullshit she pulls in front of people is what she’s *really* like? Please! And these dinners we have. They may have started off because *you two*”—she looked from Christopher to Richard and back again—“like each other and wanted to have some kind of family bond happen for all of us, but we all know they’re just a show we put on to try to impress each other.”

“Tracy, what the hell are you talking about?” Richard asked.

“Oh come on,” Tracy said snidely. “You think any of us actually *enjoy* this shit?” She waved a hand toward the four offspring, who had collectively gone rigid in their spectator seats. She turned to them with a direct eye and asked, “Go on, say it. Do any of you actually *like* this bullshit?”

The twins, Cory thought, looked uncharacteristically stunned in place, staring back at their mother with deer-in-headlights eyes.

“Uhhhh . . .”

“I don’t mind it,” Hunter answered in a quiet voice.

“Why are you *lying*?” Tracy demanded. “You’re all *constantly* complaining about it! Why the fuck are you clamming up now? What, you don’t want to hurt the crazy bitch’s feelings?”

“Tracy, what the fuck is *wrong* with you?” Richard asked.

“What’s wrong with *me*? I just asked a goddamn simple question and you all *freaked out*! If you didn’t want to make a fucking big deal out of it,” she said, turning to Carolyn, “you could have just said, ‘Therapy’s going great, thanks for asking,’ but *no*. You all had to act like we were

supposed to step on eggshells around it, and you know what? Fuck that. I'm tired of us all talking about our lives and pretending like we're not bullshitting each other!"

"*Oh!*" Carolyn countered scathingly. "Would you rather we sit here and talk about how great a mother you are, letting your sons start smoking and drinking at fourteen years old?"

"Don't you fucking talk to me about how to be a mother! *Your* son could be out *murdering* people at night—he looks like he could!—and you'd have no fucking idea because you don't pay one fucking ounce of attention to him!"

"At least I'm not thinking about *fucking* my own kid!"

"Ex-CUSE me!?"

Tracy knocked her chair to the floor as she shot up while all three sons smashed their lips under their hands.

"You heard me!" Carolyn shouted, rising up too. "I've seen you. Any chance you get you look those boys up and down like some kind of fucking predator. Does Richard know he's competing with his own sons?"

"You fucking *bitch!*"

Tracy was already speeding around the table to get to Carolyn when she sneered, "You say *I'm* the one who needs therapy, but *you're* the pedophile!"

"SHUT UP!"

Tracy met with Carolyn and the two started grabbing and swinging at each other.

"That is *not! Fucking! True!*" Tracy shouted as both Christopher and Richard jumped up to intervene.

"Carolyn!"

"Tracy!"

The women grunted and screamed as they fought to wrestle and claw each other against the force of their husbands trying to pull them apart. And as hair and fists and sharpened nails flurried about in a chaotic mess, Cory couldn't even get xir mind to work anymore. Xe turned xir head from the fight to across the table, and xir cousins looked back at xem. They were all in the same, utterly bewildered state. They had always assumed it would be one of *them* that eventually caused a scene.

But the scene playing out now seemed to barely involve them. They were on the sidelines watching it play out, and none of them felt compelled to step in. If for no other reason than it was so just . . . *what?* Is this *real?* (And in the gravity of it, Cory forgot how sick xe felt, and Bryce even seemed to have forgotten how tense he was sitting across the table from Ae.)

But also, undeniably, because none of them felt a love for their mother that would motivate them to protect her.

“Will! You! Two! Stop!” Christopher shouted.

“GET OFF ME!” Carolyn shrieked, a sound that made Cory's skin prickle.

Ae was the only one at ease, observing the whole scene through eir spread-out soul filling up the room. And unlike the others who sat stiff in their chairs, Ae's puppet was light with carefree composure.

After an agonizingly long minute, Christopher and Richard finally managed to pry apart their wives far enough that they couldn't reach each other anymore.

“That's it!” Carolyn screamed. “We're done! We're never doing this ever again, and I want you out of my fucking house!”

“Like I even want to be here!” Tracy screamed back. “And you know what? All your designs in this house are *crap!* You're so fucking pretentious with all this ugly expensive furniture and shitty decorations!”

“Oh you think *I’m* pretentious! All that jewelry *you* put out is the gaudiest shit I’ve ever seen!”

“For fuck’s sake, *stop!*” Richard shouted.

“The fuck do *you* know about it?” Tracy demanded, ignoring her husband. “You wouldn’t know taste in jewelry if it fucking hit you in the face!”

“I’ll show you getting hit in the face!”

Carolyn lunged forward, and Christopher was only able to reel her back in by lifting her off her feet with both arms and spinning in a half-circle.

“STOP IT!”

“LET GO!”

Carolyn kicked and swung her fists, but Christopher didn’t loosen his hold.

“I can take you, bitch! You don’t scare me!”

“You ever come here again and I will fucking rip your head off!” Carolyn screamed as she jumped up to crane her head backward over Christopher’s shoulder.

“You can say that because you know I’ll never step foot in this tacky house ever again!”

“We’re leaving!” Richard announced before forcefully picking Tracy up to hold her across his arms. While Tracy protested, he turned to the table and said, “Boys, get in the car!”

All three of them turned their wide eyes to each other, and then without a word got up from their seats and sped out of the dining room.

“Richard, I swear to god I’m going to kill you if you don’t put me down right now!”

“You have lost your *fucking* mind!” Richard shouted as he worked to keep her bound tight against his chest.

“She fucking started it!”

“Jesus Christ, are you *five?*”

“Are you *deaf*? Did you hear what that fucking bitch said about me?”

They were past the archway and on their way to the front door. Cory was still in his seat, feeling like his brain was the smoke cloud left after an explosion, just thick, disorienting billows that let no light through. Carolyn was still heaving and jumping up and down in an attempt to get out of Christopher’s hold. It wasn’t working.

Christopher then said with his head turned, “Cory. Go take care of the door.”

In a daze, Cory didn’t say or think anything. He just got up and followed the same path his uncle had taken with his raging wife to the open door, where he waited a moment to listen to the muffled shouting coming from the SUV parked on the driveway. After a moment the engine started, covering the voices, and Cory slowly closed the door as the wheels started rolling backwards down the long sloped driveway to the street.

He stood there for another moment, waiting for the clouds in his brain to clear up even just a little. When they didn’t, he just walked right back to the dining room, where Ae’s puppet was still sitting in the same composure. Carolyn was finally calming down, or at least getting some control over herself, enough that Christopher didn’t have to wrestle her down.

“That fucking . . . unbe-*lie*-vable . . . *woman*!” she heaved.

“Why the *fuck* do you two hate each other so fucking much?” Christopher asked, sounding both exhausted and incredulous. “I mean, *Christ*! I don’t fucking understand it!”

“But you *know* we do!” She rounded on him with nostrils flaring. “You fucking *know* we hate each other, and you’ve still had us get together like this! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I didn’t think it was *this* bad! I thought you two had some weird tension at most! I didn’t think you were literally ready to go at each other’s throats!”

“I have *told* you! I have *told* you I hate her!”

“I thought you were exaggerating!”

“You think I do that? You think I just *exaggerate* things like that?”

“I just don’t understand what this is about! How am I supposed to believe it’s like this when I don’t know any reasons why it would be?”

“Because I *tell* you! Goddamn it Christopher, you’re supposed to *listen* to me when I tell you things!”

“Ok! I’m listening! Tell me what the fuck it is between you two!”

“She’s just a *bitch*! She makes every little thing a competition! And she’s so fucking fake! Do you not *hear* her when she talks? Just goes on and on about how *great* she is and then looks at you with that condescending smile like you’re beneath her!”

“Is that really *it*?”

“She’s been like that for all twenty-plus-fucking years we’ve known her, and I’m *sick* of it! So if you want to get together with Richard, fine, you two go have dinner on your own from now on because I am *not* dealing with her ever again!”

“Fine, fine, whatever,” he said, tossing his hands up. “God knows I don’t want you to end up killing each other. Christ.”

Finally he turned around, saw Cory still standing at the dining room archway—and remembered there was a guest in the room.

“Oh fuck,” he muttered to himself before wiping down his face with both hands. “Ae. God, I am so sorry you had to see all that.”

Ae’s puppet seemed to spring back to life after having been left to sit motionless as a doll. E raised a hand and waved dismissively.

“Don’t even worry about it,” e said gently. “You don’t need any more stress than you already have.”

Christopher sighed and rubbed his eyes.

“That was horrible. I’m really—so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Ae said. “You’re not required to perform for me in your own home. It seems to me this was all just honest communication that was bound to happen eventually. Really I want to say thank you.” E looked past Christopher to Carolyn and put a hand over eir chest. “To both of you. Thank you so much for allowing me to come tonight. I’m grateful for your kindness.”

Trying to salvage any sense of hospitality there might be left, Christopher said, “I hope we it can go better next time.” It helped that there wasn’t an ounce of awkwardness in Ae’s expression, as if nothing of note had happened at all. E simply nodded and smiled, and eir final “Have a good night” sounded like they were parting ways after a perfectly delightful evening. Then e turned around to join Cory at the archway.

Cory then remembered that was xir cue to make a move.

“I’m just . . . gonna take Ae . . .” Xe pointed a thumb over xir shoulder. When both xir parents just nodded like they were in a hurry for them both to be gone, xe wondered why the fuck xe was giving an explanation at all.

“Yeah,” xe whispered to xemself, and then went off to the back door, Ae following closely behind like a gliding shadow. Then both got in the car, and it was weird to know that the whole world out there in the night was ignorant to what they had just witnessed. Cory sat in xir seat for a moment, frowning at the steering wheel as xir hands sat limply in xir lap.

“You’re confused,” Ae observed.

Cory shook xir head.

“I’m beyond confused. That was fucking *wild*.”

“The fight?”

“*Yeah* the fucking fight!”

“Hmm. I think it was one of the more reasonable things that happened tonight.”

“*What?*”

“What?”

“What do you mean ‘reasonable’? They completely lost their shit in there!”

“Yeah, but it made *much* more sense than what they were doing before. Their souls were already at war with each other the instant they were in the same space. I was surprised they could manage to act so civil. It was weird.”

Cory stared at Ae for a moment.

“It was *weird*,” xe repeated.

“Don’t you think so too?” Ae asked conversationally.

Xe blinked a few times in lieu of having a coherent thought.

“I mean . . . I guess. But it’s been going on so long it felt normal.”

“But you hate it when Carolyn acts normal around other people,” Ae pointed out. “I would have thought what happened would feel more right to you.”

Cory stared out at nothing over the steering wheel, sitting with that thought for a long moment.

“Yeah . . . I guess. I just didn’t expect it, so . . .”

“Why not?”

“Because they’ve always had this thing going on where they want to out-class the other. They hate each other, but they always took it out on each other by trying to seem more impressive in their work and how they look. Getting into a fight like that just completely breaks that down.”

“Well, now that they *have* broken it down, they don’t have to worry about performing in a competition with each other.”

“Are you saying that fight was a *good* thing?”

Ae shrugged.

“I don’t have any judgment about it being good or not. I’m just seeing what happened and the consequences.”

“Really,” xe challenged. “So you’re saying every time mom’s ever blown up at *me*, it wasn’t good or bad? It was just something that happened with consequences?”

“No.” Ae looked xem in the eye calmly. “*That’s* bad.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The difference is I *care* about *you*,” Ae answered matter-of-factly. “I don’t care about the other two. If you get hurt, I think it’s bad.”

Cory took a deep breath.

Right.

Good and bad weren’t measurable by any set, objective standard. That wasn’t how the universe worked. Which meant xe had to accept the fact that xir suffering—and anyone in the world’s suffering—weren’t objectively good or bad. It sounded harsh to say, because xe felt so deeply, so *viscerally*, that it was *bad*. That it was *wrong*.

But xe had decided that for xemself. That was something everyone decided for themselves. In an amoral universe, morals were merely personal opinions and social agreements.

“But you care about a lot more people than I do, so you think a lot more things are good and bad than I do. I understand that.”

Cory looked at Ae, who had the same profound, refreshing calm in eir aura as a clear lake surrounded by snow-splashed mountains. Somewhere inside, Cory was angry at the mere implication of all the things there were to be pissed off about. It was a constant background noise to xir life. But it didn’t flare up to the surface as they sat in the car together.

“It makes sense, considering this planet has been your whole world for most of your life. You’ve thought about how being here makes you feel for all that time. While for me, this place is insignificant. It’s not really something to think about on a meaningful level. Our experiences here and our relationships to it are completely different. But, even so, I like the way you think about it.” E smiled. “I’ve seen into a *lot* of people, and I’ve seen a lot of ways people think about good and bad. And I like your way. I feel like if I had been born here like you, your way would have been my way too.”

As it was, Ae liked Cory’s worldview, but it hadn’t become eir own. Ae was an outsider to this small world, and it was too much to expect the sun to care about the lives of a single ant colony. Cory understood that, and xe couldn’t resent Ae for it.

“Maybe, but I’m still glad you weren’t born here.”

“Oh, I am too,” Ae said quickly, which pulled a single dry laugh out of Cory. The universe would certainly be *bad* if Ae had had to endure all its strange designs.

Then xe shook xir head and sunk back into xir seat.

“But seriously,” xe said, xir voice getting distant in wonder. “They’re really going to therapy? *Seriously?* How long has *that* been going on?”

“Since the new year.”

When Cory gave Ae an odd look, e understood that xe hadn’t expected em to actually know.

“When did you find out about it?”

“Tonight. Same as you.” Ae tilted eir head slightly, like a confused puppy. “Were you not reading into them all while the fight was going on?”

“No,” xe said slowly. “But . . . you were?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

Cory had been so stunned in place xe hadn't even thought to do that. But Ae would have had no reason to be anything but curious, as usual, wanting to understand the reasons behind human actions.

“So then . . .” Xe had trouble deciding which question to ask first, but after bouncing them around in xir head for a minute, xe waved a hand and went with, “What are they going for?”

Ae gave xem a thoughtful look.

“Are you asking me to *tell* you, or do you want me to just share everything I got from them with you?”

Oh, right. Xe had that option. Fuck, xir brain was so fuzzy right now. But yeah, that would certainly be the easiest and fastest way to answer all xir questions. So xe nodded.

“Sure, yeah, that works.”

Ae's puppet went very still, staring at Cory as the rest of em rippled and then flowed into xem. It wasn't just the outermost layer xe could feel. It was also the intention rising up from deeper inside Ae to run rivers of memories into xir consciousness. And there they cleared away the dark, sticky clouds, making space where they could pool and claim all of xir attention. Years' worth of memories bonded together in a meaningful collective played out for Cory in a span of seconds, and when xir eyes refocused, xe pressed xir fingers hard against xir temples.

A minute passed, and xe felt Ae's tongues begin vibrating under the surface of xir own soul, going deeper to understand xir state of mind.

//You're overwhelmed,// Ae observed while maintaining the silence in the car.

Xe was.

Everything xe knew now was coherent and logical, thanks to the memories Ae provided arriving in such a clean condition. It was xir own emotional response that was jumbled and paralyzing.

And as comforting as it was to know that Ae could understand all the inarticulate thoughts and feelings xe was experiencing right then in that moment, xe also needed someone who could help xem process the mess of it all.

“I need to talk to Zoe.”

“Yes,” Ae agreed as xe started the car. //You need a human.//

Because Ae could feel Cory’s emotions as clearly as if they were eir own, and e could bring in all the lightning-fast thoughts that xe couldn’t possibly voice into eir own mind, but that didn’t mean e knew what to do about any of it. A human—with experience in handling complicated human situations—was better suited for that.

Cory’s response, which surprised even xemself, was, //In this one particular instance, yes.// It was the only time that had ever been true.

## CHAPTER 8

It wasn't like recordings on tape.

The memories had been copied from the original locations to Ae's soul and again to Cory's in perfect condition, without any sign of wear in between. The images were clear, the sound full, the feelings fresh. Cory experienced it all as they had—xir parents, aunt, and uncle—through their eyes, minds, bodies, and hearts, even living some of the same scenes from different perspectives. Disorienting as riding four roller coasters at once, rushing xem through four other lives. Xir head spun and ached. Xir blood drained with centrifugal force. Xir lungs restricted under the pressure.

It still wasn't as dramatic as receiving the whole of Ae's life had been. Xe was merely nauseous, not gasping with certainty that xe was about to die. There was the feeling of whiplash, but besides that, even four perspectives gathered together were easy to comprehend.

\*

Tracy was eighteen, freshly arrived in college and sitting in her intro class when she spotted the prettiest boy in the room. She was around pretty people all the time at her modeling sets, so it didn't fluster her. It *attracted* her. It was like the call of home, naturally drawing her closer. Wherever the pretty people were, that was where she was meant to be too.

So she sat next to him. Smiled at him. Talked to him. Found out his name was Richard. Richard Rhys. And she found out his eyes and hair weren't as dark up close as they were from far away. She could make out the different tones of brown in the strands of his long, thick hair and in the threads of his irises. They made a nice contrast to her green eyes and feathery, light autumn hair, she thought, as she was already imagining the two of them together in a photoshoot.

Jumping forward a little, she met Richard's brother, who was two years ahead at the same university. And where Richard was pretty, Christopher was gorgeous. He too had his hair grown

out to his shoulders, but his was almost uniformly black, unlike Richard's hair which became a kaleidoscope of brown in the sunlight. Seeing him for the first time, Tracy felt her heart gasp, *Whoa.*

She wasn't surprised that a man that beautiful had a girlfriend already, but what surprised her was how beautiful she was too. Carolyn had brown hair just a few shades away from Christopher's black, glossy and straight down to the small of her back.

Tracy instantly disliked her.

Or, to be more specific, Tracy instantly saw her as competition—and one that, currently, was winning, since she had the more beautiful match. If Tracy could come out on top—if she could lure Christopher away, win his attraction—then Tracy would be satisfied and there would be no need to dislike her anymore. It was easy to like people who weren't a threat.

She was subtle about it, flirting with Christopher in innocent ways that could always be explained as something else. She smiled and spoke with Carolyn in ways that could cut while seeming to have good intentions.

“Wow, Carolyn! You make that sweater still look good. If you want to try something in *this* season's style, just let me know. You can always borrow anything from me. I get lots of free clothes from my sets.”

But then Christopher and Carolyn got engaged in their senior year and spent the time between classes planning the wedding. It seemed too late, but Tracy kept up her efforts. Because that would help prove that her behavior was normal and not some kind of scheme. And who knew? There was always the chance Christopher could change his mind at the last minute.

By the time they graduated and the wedding came, Tracy had already been satisfied in her relationship with Richard for a while. She had decided she would be happy with him. But she couldn't help herself. She found Christopher on his own before the ceremony started.

“You look amazing.”

He smiled.

“Thanks.”

“I hope you’ll be happy.”

“Thanks. I’m sure I will be.”

She stepped closer, looked up at his face before adjusting his bowtie—even though it was already perfect, she gave it a few little twists then set it back the way it had been—then slid her hands up into his hair and pushed herself up on her toes to kiss his lips.

Just for a second.

Just a friendly kiss between friends—who would eventually, they both believed, be brother- and sister-in-law. It didn’t have to be more than that—not if Christopher didn’t decide he wanted to *make* it more. She dropped back down to her heels, looked up at him with a smile and pat him on the shoulders. She saw in his face he didn’t see any potential in her. To him, she was his brother’s girlfriend.

Her fantasy of him grabbing her roughly by the face and kissing her so hard they backed up and slammed into the wall wasn’t going to come true. Oh well. She would just have to accept that.

“I’m really happy for you,” she said with a smile that was just a hair shy of sincere. She was a model, she knew how to act with her face.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll see you out there.”

“Yeah.”

She turned and left. Defeated.

Yes, she liked Richard. Enough that she believed they would be married and live a happy life together. But this still felt like a defeat.

And that feeling had never gone away. The resentment dug down and festered in her unconscious for years, at least two decades, compelling Tracy to dislike Carolyn, making her determined to win against her in every other competition.

And maybe, maybe someday, Christopher would regret choosing Carolyn instead of her. That would be a sweet consolation prize.

\*

Christopher didn't regret choosing Carolyn.

It didn't even occur to him that he might have chosen anyone else. And he hadn't really understood Tracy's interactions with him. The fact that she was dating Richard made him interpret everything she did through the lens of friendship. It wouldn't have made sense for her to be flirting with *him* when she seemed so happy with Richard. But even if he had thought she was flirting with him, he had no interest in reciprocating.

It had only ever been Carolyn who caught his attention. From the moment he had watched her run at an upperclassman from across the open air of the campus yard and tackle him down to the ground for whistling at her, his heart hadn't pumped harder for anyone else.

Not that he was a romantic. He didn't instantly think, "That's her, that's the one I'm going to marry." But he couldn't help thinking that he *had* to know that girl.

And once he *did* know her, the feeling shifted to an enduring desire to be around her.

He liked her explosive side. He liked being in the car with her and listening to her curse at any driver that pissed her off. He liked listening to her rant about teachers she didn't like. He liked it when she showed up at his door after getting a bad grade, because that usually meant she wanted him to help her blow off steam and take her mind off of it.

It was kind of exciting for him, her fiery temper. Maybe because he didn't have one himself. For the most part, he was pretty mellow, so in a way he admired her unfiltered extremity when it flared.

Only when she was pregnant had it become . . . different. He had never said anything about it—he didn't like confrontation—but he noticed a tangible difference in the way her anger felt in the air. Mostly because she began to aim it at *him* when she had never done so before. And he didn't know what to do with it. It wasn't exciting when he was the recipient and not an observer.

All he could think to do was be quiet and let her get her screams out and hope that it was just a phase, a chemical imbalance from all the hormones the pregnancy was flooding her system with.

But it didn't get better. If anything, it only became more compartmentalized. As she expanded her professional persona and business, she learned to hold in her frustrations and bring it home to let loose in private, which meant she kept targeting him out of convenience.

So he withdrew, staying away from home longer, hoping that eventually she would get back to normal. Christopher did notice some improvement as Cory grew more self-sufficient. The less Carolyn needed to be responsible for the kid, the less irritable she became.

And as much as he didn't enjoy being screamed at, his guilt made him feel like he probably deserved it at least a *little*. After all, having a kid was in some part his fault. They never should have let it happen. They weren't ready. They didn't even really *want* to be parents.

But they were.

And he had effectively left all the parenting to her. It had made sense, since she worked from home and had more flexibility in her schedule. But still, he knew she didn't like it. He knew she resented him for burdening her. He knew he could have made an effort to help her

more. But he had been selfish. There was no way around it. He had stayed away for the sake of his own comfort. He couldn't blame her for being angry and quick-tempered as a match.

And he still never considered being with anyone else. The only thing he ever regretted was having a child, never Carolyn. Things would have been great if only they had never had that kid. He wanted the old Carolyn back. He wanted the life they could have had, if only, *if only* . . .

Years went by with those feelings always humming in his heart. But unlike Carolyn, Christopher at least never resented Cory. The kid wasn't at fault for being born, he couldn't help it. No, looking at Cory only made Christopher tired and guilty. Not only because he knew the kid's existence made his wife miserable, but because he knew the kid was miserable too.

Christopher didn't know what to do about that either. He didn't know how to be a dad. He didn't know how to talk to kids or what to do with them. And he certainly didn't know how to relate to Cory in particular. By the time he was sixteen, he seemed incomprehensible to Christopher. Christopher had hoped that by this age, he would finally be able to see Cory as a person he could engage with on some familiar ground, since Christopher could still remember his own teenage life. But Christopher couldn't recognize himself in Cory. Yes, they looked similar, but the kid was sullen, constantly scowling, friendless and withdrawn, and frankly, intimidating. Christopher carried a fear that Cory might actually bite him if he said the wrong thing.

A month after Cory's sixteenth birthday, Christopher came close to Cory's bedroom door and heard guitar music, experimental melodies as Cory worked out the base for a new song. As he stood there at the mouth of the hallway, he could hear Cory humming with the music or singing a few lines. He left, came back a few hours later to find the same thing: Cory's door closed and music pushing past it into the hallway. Evening came, and Christopher still hadn't seen Cory come out of his room.

“So?” Carolyn asked when he mentioned it to her. “If that’s where he is, that must be where he wants to be, right?”

And it felt like an epiphany breaking open on him. His sixteen-year-old son had his own car now, and he still spent all day on a Saturday alone in his room. And his wife was happy to not think about him at all. It hadn’t occurred to Christopher until just then how thoroughly he had fucked up.

And even then, he could only spend another year feeling helplessly guilty. What else could he do? Feeling shitty and guilty didn’t suddenly reveal the answers to him. And then it was Cory’s seventeenth birthday, November 4, 1995, and Christopher could only feel a crushing weight. When he looked at Cory, his mind raced with so many things he should have done. As far as he could tell, Cory was not adjusted to the world. What kind of future did he have ahead of him?

If there wasn’t one, it was Christopher’s fault. He felt that keenly. He should have done *something*. He shouldn’t have left a kid alone to raise himself. He should have been willing to make himself uncomfortable for Cory’s—and Carolyn’s—sake. He shouldn’t have been so goddamn *selfish*.

That night, when he and Carolyn were alone after Cory left—to go who-knew-where, there was no reason for him to tell *them*—Carolyn looked at him with flirtatious eyes and pulled him into their bedroom. He wanted to enjoy it, oh god did he want to, but even with her hands on his chest and her fingers unbuttoning his shirt, he just couldn’t get in the right mood.

He took hold of her wrists before she was halfway down and sighed.

“What?” she asked, sounding genuinely worried.

“Carolyn,” he asked heavily, “what are we doing?”

She cocked her head. “What do you mean? I thought we were about to have some fun.”

He shook his head, tired.

“Are we though? Really?”

Finally noticing the depth of his tone, she asked, “What’s wrong?”

He took a moment to find the words he wanted while shaking his head and gesturing vaguely with his hands.

“Is it . . . Are you ok with things the way they are?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean . . .” There was so much to say, it was hard to decide where to start. “I wish things were different. I wish *we* were different. The way we are right now, we’re almost strangers. And I know that’s on me,” he added quickly, “but I don’t like it. This isn’t how I want it to be.”

“What are you getting at?” she asked, her expression a mix of suspicion and concern.

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing yet. I just wanted to talk to you. Because I’ve been thinking about this for a long time now and I can’t keep holding it in and keeping it to myself anymore.”

A stiff expression settled on her face, like she was preparing to hear something unpleasant and potentially offensive, and took a step back before crossing her arms.

“Ok. I’m listening.”

Well that was something. He could at least get started with that, which was more than he had done in seventeen years.

He swallowed and took a breath.

“I’ve wanted to tell you I’m sorry. I’m sorry I haven’t been there for you. I’m sorry I haven’t helped you. I’ve been a coward and I’ve fucked up. We’ve gotten to this point where it doesn’t feel like we have an actual relationship, we just have an *arrangement*. We live together

but we have separate lives for the most part, and we just hook up whenever it's convenient for both of us. I never wanted it to be like this. But I fucked up. I pulled away and just hoped things would get better on their own, like an idiot. I didn't know what to do and I didn't bother doing any work to figure out what I *could* do. Carolyn." He said her name earnestly, his eyes full of emotion as he looked at her. "I wanted us to have a life *together*. That's why I married you. And instead I made you hate me."

Carolyn was looking at him, her stiff expression ebbing away as bewilderment washed in. After a moment in which her mind waded through the confusion, she said, "I don't hate you."

It was Christopher's turn to look confused.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Really. You really think I'd still be married to you if I hated you?"

He hesitated, not wanting to admit that he had assumed it to be the case. "I don't know."

"Why would you think I hated you?"

"Because I ruined your life. You got pregnant because of me, and I know you hated it, and you've hated having a kid Cory was born. I figured you've always resented me for that. And for how I left you alone with him."

"Well, yeah, I did," she said matter-of-factly. "And it did piss me off being the only one who had to do anything about it. But it worked out all right, considering."

"You really think so?"

"Sure. Cory's got his own life going. He figured out his own way without needed us much. And I know we both felt the same way about it. If you had ever pressured me into having another one, then I *would* have hated you, and kicked your ass."

That wasn't a joke, and they both knew it.

"Right. But . . . Do you really think he's ok?"

“What?”

“I’m asking . . . do you really think Cory has a good life? He never looks happy to me. Not that I see him much, but, I barely know anything about him, and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t have any friends. I think he’s miserable, and I’m pretty sure it’s our fault.”

She looked at him, waiting for him to get to his final point.

He rubbed his forehead with his fingertips.

“Look, I know we kind of agreed that we were going to be hands-off with him. But looking back, looking at how he’s ended up, I think that was the wrong choice. It wasn’t fair to him. We didn’t take enough responsibility for a mistake that wasn’t his fault. We wanted to pretend that we were giving him enough, but you just have to look at him to know that kid’s not all right. We *did* that to him. We fucked up having a kid when we didn’t really want one, and we fucked up treating him like an inconvenience. I was never going to be a good dad, but looking back, I wish I had been better than *this*.”

Carolyn tightened her folded arms and looked away. He could tell she was clenching her jaw behind her lips.

“Will you talk to me?” he asked. “Tell me what you think.”

She worked her jaw and shifted her shoulders before looking back at him. She shook her head.

“I don’t want to be a mom,” she said hotly. “I don’t even *think* of myself as one most of the time. I look at Cory and I think he’s someone else’s kid just living here as a guest or something. I keep expecting some day he’ll just be gone. God, I would have made a better aunt. I wouldn’t have minded just short bursts of hanging out with a kid.”

“You *are* an aunt.”

“I mean to kids who *don’t* have a complete bitch for a mom.”

“Right,” he said without argument, not wanting to lead the conversation into a tangent.

“I thought a kid would *appreciate* having parents who left him alone! Isn’t that what all kids want? To be able to run around as much as they want and do things their own way? I never thought we were great parents but I thought our kid would at least be more grateful for all the independence. But . . . you aren’t wrong. He’s never happy when I see him either.”

She sighed and threw up a hand.

“But I don’t know. Even if I went back and started over, I still wouldn’t know what to do differently. What the hell are you supposed to do with a baby? Or a toddler? Or a little kid? They don’t make sense to me.”

“I know. I don’t know either.”

“So then what? Do you think we’ll be any better now that he’s a teenager?”

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. “For all I know, it’s probably too late to do anything, but . . . I kind of hate myself too much now to keep doing nothing. And if nothing else, I want to do something about *us*. I think we have a chance to be ok, but, I think we need help. Because we don’t know what to do. And I hate seeing you get so angry as much as you do.”

She opened her mouth and made a short, offended sound in her throat. “I’ve always gotten angry!”

“Yeah but not at *me*. When we were dating, you’d go after *other* people, but you never screamed at *me*. When Cory came along, it was like you *only* screamed at me—or him. It’s not a great feeling.”

“Oh, and you think it feels great for *me*?”

“No, I *don’t*,” he said, holding his hands up. “And that’s exactly why I’m saying all this. I think you know you’ve gotten worse since you had a baby, and I don’t think you want to be the way you are, but you don’t know how to get better. I think you’re tired. I know I am. I’m tired of

feeling weak and distant and useless. I want to fix things. I think we *both* want to. I think we both want things to change. And I think we need help.”

“You mean . . . like, therapy? You want us to get a therapist?”

“I think that’s a place to start. If you’re up for it.”

She gave him a straight, deep look, and he could see the tip of her tongue gently poking against the inside of one cheek.

Then she said bluntly, “Let me ask you one question first. In all this time that you’ve apparently been *tired* of me and thinking all these other things—”

“I didn’t say—”

“Mm!”

She lifted a finger and held it up right in front of his lips.

“Shush.”

He sighed but said nothing. She slowly withdrew her hand.

“In all this time, have you been with anyone else behind my back?”

His brow furrowed.

“You’re asking me if I’ve had an affair?”

“Yes. That’s *exactly* what I’m asking.”

She tightened her lips and tapped her fingers against her arm as she stared at him like a living lie detector.

He could only look back incredulously.

“No,” he said.

“No. Not even once?”

“No,” he repeated. “That . . . never even crossed my mind. That’s not . . . I’ve never wanted an affair, I’ve only wanted *you*.”

She looked at him with a sharp, assessing eye and hummed to herself.

“Why?” he asked. “Have *you* had an affair?”

She scoffed.

“Ha. No. There’s no one else out there who could handle me. It’s you or nothing.”

That made Christopher smile. He didn’t know if Carolyn had ever felt an attraction for another man, but even if she had, as long as she *chose* him, that was all that mattered. He himself had never felt attracted to anyone but her, but apparently that was a hard standard for anyone else to meet.

Carolyn tapped her fingers on her arm a little more, meeting her husband’s unwavering gaze until she was satisfied. After a sigh, she said, “All right. If you say you want to give therapy a try, then I will too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Why not. Just make sure *Tracy* doesn’t find out. The last thing I need is that woman having one more thing to needle me with.”

“I won’t tell her—or Richard.”

“Good.”

And Christopher genuinely thought it would be good. That it would help them move in the right direction. And he meant that about Cory too. He still feared it was probably too late, but he wanted to at least try. They owed him that.

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“It’s not like I *hate* him,” Carolyn explained as an older woman in a trim suit sat across from her and Christopher, listening patiently. “I’ve hated *having* him sometimes, but he’s all right. We have fun sometimes.”

“When it’s convenient for *you*,” the woman pointed out. On the wall behind her were several framed degrees, all granted to Susan M. Helms.

“Well yeah. I don’t exactly have time for fun outside of when it’s convenient for me.”

“And what about Cory? Is it always a convenient time for *him*?”

“Yeah. It’s always when he’d normally be in school, which he doesn’t like going to anyway. Or if it’s not, he doesn’t have any other plans that would conflict.”

The therapist looked at her steadily, her skepticism permeating the silence.

“Would you say you have a good relationship with Cory, overall?” she asked after a moment.

Carolyn shrugged.

“Probably as good as you can have with a moody teenager.”

“How much time do you spend with him?”

Carolyn blew out a breath as she looked upward in thought and then shook her head.

“I don’t know. Sometimes I go a whole week and never see him. And sometimes we’ll have a couple of dates in one month. It just depends on the mood.”

“What mood?”

“You know, the general mood.”

“Are you sure you don’t mean *your* mood?”

“And what’s the problem if it does?” she snapped. “I work fucking sixteen-hour days sometimes! Yeah I like what I do, but I work *hard*, ok? Cory’s got all the fucking time in the world because he doesn’t do anything except sit around by himself and play music! What’s so bad about scheduling our time together around *my* free time and *my* mood, huh?”

The therapist sat calmly with one leg crossed over the other and her hands folded on her thigh.

“Do you have any other friends that you go on dates with?”

Carolyn scrunched her nose at the breezy dismissal of her point and sat back on the couch with her arms crossed.

“Sort of. Just clients really. Having my own business means I have to socialize to spread my name and grow my network.”

“So you don’t consider them friends?”

Carolyn shrugged.

“Not strictly. If they were friends I wouldn’t have to put on a customer service face with them the whole time. But I can still have a good time with them.”

“And what about Cory? When you go on fun dates with him, do you think of him as your friend then?”

Carolyn pursed her lips and tapped her foot in the air as it hung from a leg crossed over the other.

“Maybe.”

“Do you feel like you don’t have to perform with him?”

Carolyn’s foot tapped faster.

“Kind of. If we’re out in public, I want to put on a good face, but I don’t feel like I have to perform for *him* specifically. But if I take him out somewhere, it’s because I’m in a good mood and I want to celebrate it. I feel good and I want to bring him along with me for that.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Because I don’t want to be alone and he’s always right there.”

“Is that the only reason? Do you like how you feel when you’re with him specifically, or would you prefer someone else was more convenient for you?”

Carolyn sighed.

“I don’t know. When I’m in the moment I don’t really think about it that much. I just do what I want to do and he goes with me. And then when it’s over, things go back to normal and all I think about is work.”

“Do you feel a maternal bond with him during those times? Do you feel like you love your son when you’re in that kind of good mood?”

Carolyn pulled her lips inward to wet them on her tongue before she answered.

“Yeah, I’d say so. Most of the time, especially in the beginning, I didn’t want to be a mom. I wanted to turn back time and keep things the way they were, with just Christopher and me. Having a baby felt like a total invasion into our life. I thought I’d hate it forever. But sometimes . . .” She tossed her hands up then set them back down on her thigh. “I don’t know. That feeling just hits me. Out of nowhere. And I just want to shower him with love. But eventually it goes away, sometimes as quickly as it came. I’m not in control of it at all.”

“Is it possible that when that feeling hits you, you get this overwhelming feeling to show him affection and attention because you want to make up for the fact that you basically ignore him the rest of the time?”

“I mean, maybe. I don’t know. It’s hard to understand the mood when I’m not *in* it.”

“And so, right now, for example, you don’t feel any interest in Cory, is that right?”

Carolyn tapped her arm and sighed to the empty side.

“Maybe not *no* interest, but I’m too busy to wonder what he’s up to all the time. And he can take care of himself so he doesn’t *need* me to take an interest in him.”

“Do you really believe that?” the therapist asked. “Do you really think your child has never needed you to give him love and attention?”

“I gave him independence. Kids hate parents that suffocate them.”

“Parenting isn’t a one-or-the-other choice between abandonment and suffocation. Children need to feel loved and wanted to have a healthy development, emotionally and socially. You can do that without ignoring them and without trapping them.”

Carolyn sighed angrily. Defensively.

“Well what good is it to say that now?” she demanded, rising to her feet while swatting one arm through the air. “We fucked up. We fucked our kid up because we didn’t know how to be parents. And now it’s too late to do anything about it, right? Well fan-fucking-tastic. *Thank you so fucking much!*”

As Christopher dropped his forehead into a hand to rub it, the therapist kept looking up at Carolyn with her hands laced together on her thigh.

“I’m not saying it’s too late. And if you thought it was too late then you wouldn’t even be here talking about it, would you?”

Carolyn’s nostrils flared as she glared. She put her hands on her hips and looked off to the side before raising one hand and pressing her fingertips against her forehead.

“But if your relationship with Cory is going to get any better, first of all, you’re going to have to really want it to. This isn’t something you can just try to do half-heartedly and only when it’s convenient for you. This is going to take work. And you have to be ready to accept that it might not even result in anything. Because maybe it *is* too late. We don’t know. We don’t know what Cory thinks about any of this. And while I recommend you bring him in so we can *find out* what he thinks, if you’re determined not to do that yet, then you at least need to be willing to make an effort and take risks. Because Cory will absolutely be able to tell if you’re not committed to this, and he won’t open up to you with weak attempts.”

Carolyn set her hand back on her hip and looked back at the therapist. She sighed heavily enough that her shoulders rose and fell.

“Are you ready to do that?” the therapist asked.

Carolyn’s shoulders sagged, tired already at the thought. She looked at Christopher, who had an earnest expression.

“Are *you*?” she asked.

“I have to,” Christopher said. “I can’t keep doing things the way we have been.”

“So is this all really about your sense of guilt?” she asked accusingly. “Or are you really thinking about Cory?”

Christopher rubbed his forehead again.

“Probably both, honestly. I have a lot of guilt. A lot. I’m not gonna lie and say this has nothing to do with that. But I have guilt because I want to do what’s right for Cory, and we haven’t been doing that. If I wasn’t thinking about what’s good for Cory, I wouldn’t feel guilty about that. Don’t *you* feel guilty?”

Carolyn crossed her arms tightly, tapped all the fingers of one hand in a wave a few times, then sat down again with her legs crossed.

“If I feel guilty, then that means I feel bad for caring about myself and not making sacrifices for my kid. I was never willing to do that, which is why I should have never had a kid in the first place.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that in itself,” the therapist pointed out. “The problem is that you *did* have a kid, and knowing that you still weren’t willing to make any sacrifices for him, you made no effort to find a more loving home for him. You kept him and forced him to grow up neglected. You injured another human being out of selfishness. *That* was wrong. And if you don’t feel guilty about it, then there’s no point in discussing this anymore.”

“So I’m a bad person because I don’t adore my kid twenty-four hours a day?”

“No,” the therapist replied, holding her professionalism. “I’m not here to judge and say you’re a bad person. But I can say you did a bad thing by making no effort to make sure you son grew up in a healthy environment. And you had that responsibility since you decided to keep him for yourself. I know it’s not fun to hear that you’ve done something wrong, but you have to acknowledge it before you can work on fixing it. But again, that brings us back to the question of whether that’s something you’re even interested in. And be honest. Do you care about Cory enough to want to try to build a relationship with him?”

Carolyn turned her head and looked at her husband, who went very still as he waited for her answer. She swallowed.

“Do you think I’m a bad person?” she asked quietly.

Christopher reached out a hand and gripped hers tightly.

“I don’t know. But I’m no better. And even if we’re two bad, fucked-up people, I still love you, and I still want to be with you, and I want us to try to be better together.”

Carolyn’s face scrunched up with the look of tears about to come—tears of anger, defeat, and pain—and she squeezed Christopher’s hand back.

“I didn’t *want* to be a bad mom, ok?” she said aggressively, her voice cracking. “That wasn’t like, my evil plan when all this started. But I thought that if I tried to be a *good* mom, it’d just make me hate him more. I thought leaving him alone was the best way to keep me from hating him for ruining my life. I thought he’d be ok. I thought he’d understand. I thought he’d appreciate us letting him live his own life. And now we’re here and I still don’t know what the fuck I’m doing!”

She pressed her fingertips against her eyes to try to hold the tears in. Christopher scooted over on the couch so he could wrap his arm around her shoulders and pull her in.

The therapist picked up a box of tissues and held them across the space between them so Christopher could take it. He set it on the cushion and pulled one tissue out so he could hold it up as an offering near Carolyn's face.

"That's what I'm for," she said. "That's why you're here."

Carolyn took the tissue and dabbed at her eyes. She wanted to keep her makeup as intact as possible so it wouldn't need as much touching up when they were done. She took in a deep breath through her nose to clear it, then taking Christopher's hand again, she looked at the therapist.

"All right. So what's the first step?"

"So you're ready then?"

Carolyn squeezed Christopher's hand.

"Yeah. I think I either do something now or I just have to accept that I *am* a shitty person." She looked at Christopher. "And I don't want to be a bigger bitch than Tracy."

Christopher physically restrained himself from rolling his eyes. He didn't want to derail the positive momentum.

"All right. Then here's my initial thought." The therapist uncrossed and recrossed her legs in the opposite way. "Carolyn. The next time you get into your motherly mood, I want you to record your thoughts. Write down exactly how you feel toward Cory, how much you love him, what you like about him, how good you feel spending time with him. Put as much detail into it as you can. And then, when the feeling ends, read over what you've written. Every day. Even multiple times a day. Read it and try to take yourself back to that time. Try to recreate it in your mind. It might take a while, but the goal is to train your brain to think those same thoughts *consistently* rather than sporadically . . ."

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Years of life played out, dragging Cory along as the lead role. And when it was over, Cory's whole being jangled with the blare of emotions. Most of them weren't xir own, but xir body accepted them and felt them as if they were. Which just made everything more difficult. Ironically. Because xe could understand. Xe could live someone else's life and feel their emotions. And that made it a struggle to separate back to xemself and form xir own independent feelings. Xe thought xe actually preferred just being alone and angry over this.

It was still overwhelming as xe and Ae slithered through the open creases between standing bodies and grounded chairs and tables. The lights were dim and moody and a band on stage was playing some kind of upbeat pop-rock song. Cory's soul was too full to take in much of it. The notes barely brushed the surface of xir ears as xe made xir way to the bar.

Xe didn't sit down when xe got to an empty space, so neither did Ae. E just stood beside Cory as xe leaned forward on the counter. Xe could see Zoe pouring a dark drink for a customer farther down, so xe decided to wait to get her attention. But then another bartender interrupted xir timing.

"Can I help you?" he asked after sliding up in front of Cory. He had his hair pulled back in a ponytail—which made his one diamond earring easy to see—a neatly trimmed beard, and tattoos on his arms revealed by his rolled-up sleeves.

"No," Cory said. "I need Zoe."

The guy looked xem over for a second, like he was screening Cory to decide whether xe was permissible or not, then turned his head.

"Hey! Zoe!"

She was washing something in the sink when she looked up.

"Yeah?"

"Someone's asking for you."

Zoe looked over curiously, and when her eyes caught Cory, her brows rose.

“Hey,” she said while drying her hands on a towel. She walked over and pat the other guy on the shoulder. “Thanks Ian.”

“Sure,” he said before passing her to go to the other side.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” Zoe said. “How’d your dinner go?”

“I need to talk to you.”

Zoe paused and looked at Cory more closely. When she realized how agitated xe was, her expression sobered and she leaned in.

“What’s up? Actually wait. How did you get in here? We don’t let minors in on Fridays.”

“Ae made IDs for us.”

Zoe gave Ae an incredulous look.

“You made IDs.”

Ae tilted eir head slightly.

“You’re surprised.”

Zoe blinked and pursed her lips, but it took a few seconds before she could speak.

“When you say ‘made’, you mean like . . . ?”

Ae held out eir hand and from inside the flesh, a rectangular shape pressed upward until it slicked its way out by osmosis to sit flat in eir palm—a plastic card with Cory’s picture and information, the only incorrect detail being the year of birth. Zoe stared at it with wide eyes and whistled.

“Damn. I didn’t think about you being able to do that.”

“It’s nothing special. It’s no different than the rest of this,” Ae replied, gesturing to eir body. “It’s all just molecules to me.”

“Uh-huh. Right.”

“I really need you, right now,” Cory said, noticeably restraining xir voice. “I’m sorry, I can’t think of anyone else I can go to. Can we talk? Please?”

Zoe looked at xem deeply and put a hand on top of xirs.

“Yeah. Let’s talk. Come with me.”

She flicked her head to the side and Cory followed her behind the seated customers as she walked the length of the bar.

“I’m gonna take a break in the back,” xe heard her say to Ian as she passed him, and then she came out the side and led Cory and Ae down the back hallway to the staff only area. She pointed to a beige couch, which Cory dropped onto near the edge, and pulled over a wooden chair for herself. She set it a foot in front of Cory while Ae, instead of sitting next to Cory, hopped up to the top of a pile of empty cardboard boxes in the corner of the room and sat there weightlessly with legs crossed. The air in the room mumbled as muffled music from outside seeped in through the vibrating walls.

“What’s going on?” Zoe asked, leaning forward in her seat.

Cory’s right foot bounced quickly as xe wrung xir hands together. Then xe raked xir fingers through xir hair before pressing them together.

“A lot.”

“Ok,” Zoe said slowly. “So, does that mean you want to just give it to me the easy way?”

Cory licked xir lips then rubbed xir forehead with xir fingertips. Her soul was open and inviting, ready to receive anything xe chose to share. Xe bit down on the inside of xir lips.

“I don’t know, I don’t think that’s what I need right now.”

“Ok. What *do* you need?”

“I don’t . . . I feel like . . . I want to put it in my own words. I’ve got all this mess in my head”—xe wagged xir hands in the air to the sides of xir head—“and I don’t think just handing

it all over like some tangled Christmas lights is going to make it make sense. I want to straighten it out. I need to talk through it, run my fingers down the lines and untangle the knots and smooth it out as much as I can. I need someone who can help me do that.”

Zoe glanced at Ae, just briefly. Someone else might have been jealous. It was common for humans to want to be their partner’s everything and to resent anyone who could give something they couldn’t. But there was nothing like that in Ae. Not in eir face or eir aura. Ae observed quietly, curiously, making sure not to interfere or distract as e sat out of the way.

Zoe clasped her hands together as she leaned forward.

“Well I’m here, so go for it. I’ll do what I can.”

Cory nodded xir gratitude and took a deep breath. The walls hummed, the lips and throat around the voice of music on the other side. But the hum in Cory’s head was louder. Images and heartbeats and storm cloud emotions thundered together in xir ears.

“It’s my parents.” Xe shook xir head, bounced xir heel, bowed down to rub xir forehead. “We were having dinner, like normal, and then out of nowhere my aunt basically announces that my parents have apparently been going to *therapy*.”

Zoe cocked her head and knit her brows.

“That’s *good* though, right?”

Cory threw up xir hands and exhaled sharply.

“I mean, I *guess*. Yeah. But . . .” Xir face contorted in the mix of emotions as xe shook xir head. Then xe sighed and raked xir fingers through xir hair again.

Zoe held still and waited patiently.

Cory kept breathing heavily. Xe leaned back hard and threw up a hand in vague frustration.

“I just . . . I don’t know how to feel about it. I mean, they’re going out of their way to get help with their *issues*, but like, they didn’t . . . they didn’t mention anything to *me*. And *I’m* the one—I’m the one they’ve fucked over the most. Why wouldn’t they tell me they want to try to make things better?”

Xe spoke loudly, both demanding and desperate.

“I mean, I get part of it’s because they think it’s too late. And I don’t know, maybe it is. Maybe I can’t get over everything they’ve done. Maybe I won’t be able to see them any differently. I don’t know. I don’t know. But how would they know? How would they know how I feel about it unless they fucking *say* something?”

Xe held out xir hands in aggressive supplication for an answer.

“What are they waiting for? Do they think I’ll just notice something and just assume they’re trying to be better? Why the fuck would I think that? They’ve never done *anything* to make me assume the best of them. They’ve always made their intentions perfectly clear: they want to avoid me as much as fucking possible. And now I’m supposed to just, what, get over it? See that they’re finally starting to feel a little guilty about it and say it’s all fine? When are they going to get around to fucking saying something to *me*? When are they going to tell me to my face that they fucked up? They can go to therapy in secret all they fucking want, but that’s not the same as fucking *apologizing* for all that fucking *shit* they put me through! If they feel guilty, I’m the one they should fucking say it to! What the fuck!?”

Zoe sat leaning forward intently, her eyes catching every move xe made and every minute change in xir expression. Her ears caught all the emotional pitches in xir voice. Her soul absorbed all the vibrations flaring out in xirs. Her hands hung together between her knees, locked by laced fingers, and she waited a few beats to give the echoes of Cory’s words their own space before she offered her own.

“Cory,” she began softly, reaching out to lay a reassuring hand on xir knee. “You are absolutely right. Ok? Your parents have really hurt you, and you deserve an apology if they’re really sincere about it.”

She pulled her hand back and laced her fingers back together.

“And maybe it’s taking them so long to get to it is because they don’t actually know how to apologize yet. Maybe seventeen years of fucking up seems like too much right now and they’re looking for help to even just start. I know you’ve been waiting a long time for them to acknowledge how wrong they’ve been, but it might be better to get that a little later done *right*, as best as they can get it, than for them to rush into it and fuck it up too.”

Cory raked xir fingers through xir hair as emotions battled on xir face.

“I don’t even know why I fucking care!” xe shouted. “Why the fuck does this even fucking bother me so much? Fuck!” Xe pounded xir fist against the bottom of the couch. “I shouldn’t fucking care! I shouldn’t care about them feeling guilty or apologizing or changing! They shouldn’t mean anything to me! So *why* . . .” Xe sucked in a loud, wet breath and curled xir fingers into hard fists while xe ground her teeth. “Why does it fucking *hurt*?”

Zoe had to swallow down a lump as she watched Cory’s eyes grow wet and pink. She was getting better at that. She just had to remind herself every time that it wasn’t her role to cry with a client. Her role was to be solid ground that could hold them while they cried.

She took a deep breath through her nose, in and out, slowly.

“I know it’s frustrating,” she said, her voice deeper now. “And it’s not fair. It’s not fair that people who never seemed to care about you can hurt you. But that’s probably why it hurts. They’re *supposed* to care about you. You’re hurting and angry because you’ve been missing something your whole life, and you’ve been trying to cope with it on your own by embracing it

and saying you don't want them either. And that's gotten you pretty far. It's given you some strength when you've been lonely."

She tilted her head and looked at him earnestly.

"But you can't control what your heart wants, and your heart wants your parents to love you. You can't reason that out of you. You want them to love you, and you resent them for *not* loving you. You don't want them to have the power to hurt you, and you hate that they do anyway. And if they come to you *now* saying they want to really love you, it feels like your choices are to either admit that their love is something that you want and that you've been hurt by them, or reject them in an attempt to hurt them back and get some satisfaction from that. You don't want to be vulnerable against them, but you can't deny that you're hurt if you're being honest. And that's the struggle you've got going on. And honestly, there's not going to be a nice, neat way to clean all this up. And that's assuming you all even make it to that step."

Cory rubbed xir face hard with both hands, fatigued. Everything she said felt true, and the feeling of being understood provided some support to the other feelings that were so unsteady. But it was still a lot. Xe hunched forward to set xir elbows on xir knees and pressed xir folded hands against xir lips. Xe sighed through xir nose and looked up at Zoe. Then xe pulled xir hands away to give xir mouth just enough room to ask, "So what do I do?"

Zoe opened her hands in a gesture of uncertainty.

"Depends on what you want."

Cory dropped xir head down and pressed xir forehead against the sharp peaks of xir folded fingers.

"I don't know what I want."

"Well, it's hard to figure something like that out when you're right in the middle of an emotional shock. You're gonna need to take some time and think about it. Really think about it."

Xe took a deep breath, making xir shoulders spread. “Great.” Xe sat up and slumped backwards against the couch. “I *needed* something else on my mind.”

“It happens,” Zoe said, also leaning back in her chair. “Unexpected things can just crash right into you and make a mess of things.”

Cory leaned xir head back over the couch far enough to look at the ceiling. “Yeah,” xe sighed. Then xe laughed dryly.

“Oh, but you know what’s funny?” xe asked, then lifted xir head again so xe could give Zoe a smirk.

“What?”

“They’re going to *your* place to get therapy.”

Zoe’s brows rose.

“They’re coming to my office?”

“Yeah.” Xe had seen it in the memories. Xir parents didn’t know Zoe, but of course xe had recognized her when xe saw her through their eyes. “They’re seeing some woman named Susan Helms.”

“Whoa,” she said. “Susan’s the head counselor of the whole office. It takes something special to get an appointment with her.”

“Something like loads of money?”

Zoe snorted with a half-smirk.

“That might do it.”

As she held her eyes on Cory, her mind began to whirl of its own volition. Within seconds, as if by a facial recognition program, a memory appeared like a located computer file and played itself out.

She was walking through the office. She had just arrived. Her supervisor was seeing a couple out. They had apparently just finished a session. Susan's clients in particular were always well-off because she had a good reputation and was highly sought-after. This couple was no exception. Their clothes were high-end and classy. But they weren't just affluent, they were gorgeous. Both were tall and model-fit. The woman had dark brown hair ironed silky straight. The man had black hair combed into a feathery style behind his ears.

Her thought at the time had been that she was proud of them for seeking help when they obviously made an effort to look like they had everything together. Probably even took pride in it.

Her thought now was, upon revisiting the memory and seeing their faces as they passed her on the way to the exit, how could she have missed the resemblance?

"Oh my god, yeah, I see it now," she said, leaning in closer to Cory's face. "I've seen them there. It didn't click with me until just now but . . . Damn, yeah, you look just like them." The black, feathery hair from xir dad. Dusky blue eyes from xir mom. Xir face a mashup of their similar noses, lips, and sharp, high cheeks. Xe was like a computer-generated image of what their offspring might look like.

Cory scrunched xir nose and looked off to the side.

"Great."

"Hey look, if nothing else, they at least gave you some really good genes. You are one hot and handsome man." A strange thing to come from Zoe, but she was gay, not blind. She knew a glamor magazine cover when she saw one. They were spread out on the table in the office waiting room every day. And she knew what the Calvin Klein models on the insides looked like too. She wasn't above flipping through them every now and then out of boredom.

Cory curled xir lip in a wordless *ew* as xe looked back at her.

“That’s not something I wanna hear.”

Zoe laughed.

“I know, sorry.”

It was just another reason why xe hesitated to pursue being a lead singer on a bigger scale. Xe had the face for it, sure, one for the cover of Rolling Stone, but xe didn’t want to be the target of people’s lust and idolization.

Cory raked xir fingers through xir hair then said, “I guess I should let you get back to work. Sorry for just showing up like that.”

Zoe waved a hand.

“Don’t worry about it. Ian’s great, he can handle it. And I’ll just let him take a long break too.”

Cory turned xir head to see Ae still sitting on eir high perch, owl eyes watching closely from an immobile frame. E was even keeping eir nebula-soul’s motion to a minimum. Xe turned back to Zoe.

“Well, look, since we’re here anyway, how about I take Vio home? Save Aki the trouble of leaving and coming back.”

“You sure?” she asked. “You don’t have to if you’re not up for it.”

“No, it’s fine. His place isn’t too out of the way or anything.”

“Maybe not, but you’ve got a lot going on right now. You don’t need to interrupt yourself.”

“I don’t think I’m gonna be able to finish all the thinking I need to do in one night, so interrupting myself for a short drive isn’t going to hurt anything.”

Zoe exhaled through her nose then reached out and pat Cory on the shoulder.

“All right. I’ll go let Aki know. What are you two going to do in the meantime? There’s still about half an hour before he needs to get going. You can hang out in here if you want.”

“I think I want to go outside,” Cory said. “It feels too small in here right now.”

“Ok. You gonna hang out near your car? Aki can bring Vio out to you if you do.”

“Yeah. That works.”

“Kay. Well you know where the door is.”

“Right.”

“And Cory,” she added, “you can come to me anytime, ok? I’ll always help you if I can.”

Cory looked up at Zoe and pushed down the awkward feeling that came with the direct eye contact, then nodded.

“Thanks.”

Zoe pat xir shoulder again, then looked to Ae for a silent farewell, and left the room.

Cory stayed still for a moment as the building continued to breathe and sing around xem. Then Ae’s body drifted like a cloud of smoke from the boxes to xir side on the couch.

“You seem calmer,” Ae observed. //The chaos inside you has quieted. You’re not being rocked by a storm. Now you’re floating adrift in a vast sea, wondering where the land is and how to get there.//

//Yeah,// xe agreed. //I’m still lost, but at least I can think a little more clearly.//

And now that xir mind had become so still, the humming walls surrounding xem became a distracting nuisance. Especially since xe didn’t like the music. Too happy.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Staying solid, Ae walked with Cory out the back staff exit and all the way to the car. They could still hear the humming of live music, but it was much softer from the parking lot and not a cocoon of vibrations encasing them. Now it was the crisp air that tried to nip at xem. But

Cory had always been comfortable in the cold. Xe liked it when the weather suited xir preference for wearing multiple long layers over xir whole body.

Cory and Ae took their seats in the car and let a quiet settle inside with them.

Then Ae said, "I'm glad Zoe could help you."

Cory turned xir head in eir direction. "Does it bother you that you couldn't?"

"Bother me?"

"Yeah."

"Why would it bother me?"

"I guess because . . . if there's something you can't do for someone but you wish you could, and then they have to get it from someone else, it can make you feel inadequate."

"Hmm," Ae replied thoughtfully. "I hadn't thought about it. I suppose it would have been more convenient if I had been able to give you the kind of support you needed, but what Zoe can do isn't an ability I've ever had or needed to have, so I wouldn't expect myself to be able to do it. The only thing that *does* make me feel inadequate is not being able to figure out how you can evolve. That seems like something I *should* be able to do. And I supposed I feel guilt because I can't. But if someone else could do that for you, I would be happy, because I just want the problem to be solved. I don't need to be the one to solve it. The same is true now. If Zoe can help you in a way that I can't, then I'm happy, because I want you to get what you need."

Cory sighed hard and leaned back into xir seat. "I wouldn't need this if I could just get away," xe muttered.

Ae fixed on xem with interest, not just with eir eyes but with the light touch of eir tongues.

"Are you sure?"

Cory frowned and then turned xir head to look at em.

“Yeah,” xe said. “If I could get out of here, all the way out, then none of it would matter.”

Ae tilted eir head slightly.

“Maybe.”

Cory lifted an eyebrow.

“But?”

“But,” Ae repeated as eir legs drew up into the seat, boneless and fluid as water, until they were folded and tucked beneath her. Ae set eir left arm against the backrest and eir right hand on its wrist. “Just because it wouldn’t matter *out there* doesn’t mean the influence it’s had on you up until then would just disappear.”

Cory looked at Ae hesitantly and swallowed.

“What are you saying?”

Ae’s shoulders rose and fell as e performed a sigh.

“You aren’t just the soul you were when you were born. Your environment shapes you. All the things you’ve experienced have affected your soul and given it opportunities to develop. The music that you make, you don’t make it just because it’s the sound you’re drawn to by your nature. You make it because it expresses how you feel, and you feel the way you do because it’s a response to your circumstances, to the environment you’re mired in. That’s all part of you. Leaving the environment alone won’t undo all the development that happened here. You might go through more developments in a new environment, but you’ll still always have your memories. The way you feel now will always be somewhere inside you.”

“Well maybe it just won’t bother me as much as it does now. Maybe it’ll be easier to live with.”

“It’s possible. There’s no way to know for sure without seeing it play out.”

“Is there another ‘but’ coming?”

Ae smiled.

“Well if you say it first, I don’t have to. I was just going to say, and I think you already know this, that honestly . . . you like the way you feel here.”

“What?”

“You like it. You like being here and feeling separate, feeling different. You like being angry. You like feeling alone. It hurts, but you kind of like that too.”

Cory frowned and tightened xir lips. Then xe looked away and stared at the windshield without seeing it as xe ground xir teeth.

“That doesn’t mean you don’t also want to get away. I know you do. That’s a genuine desire you have. But I think you’re comfortable feeling uncomfortable, feeling out of place, feeling like you’re looking at everyone else from the other side of a glass wall. You’re so used to it you’ve become addicted to it. You like feeling angry because it energizes you. You like feeling friction between yourself and everyone else and how it gives you something to contrast yourself with. It’s exciting. It’s even fun. Being angry, in a way, makes you happy. And I don’t know that you’d be able to give that up completely right away. I think if we were able to leave this place tomorrow, you’d eventually find yourself itching to come back and find a conflict that you can ignite yourself against.”

“I’m never bored with you!”

Cory finally found a reason to protest. Xe twisted in xir seat to face Ae as forward as xe could.

“When it’s just the two of us, I want it to last forever. I never want to have to get back to all this!”

“I know. I’m not saying you don’t. But maybe you want it to last forever because you know it won’t. Isn’t that a common human experience? Wanting something because you can’t have it?”

Cory’s mouth opened in stunned offense, and xe had to stare at Ae for a moment before xir mind and tongue could cooperate again.

“You think that if I can become like you and we’re actually able to leave here forever, I wouldn’t want to anymore?”

Ae tapped eir fingers against eir wrist.

“Honestly, I think it’s possible, but I don’t know. Human thought is still too complicated for me to predict. Too many variables. I can’t know what you would feel in a completely new situation. I just know what I see in you while you’re in this one.”

Cory slumped back into the seat and rubbed xir face with both hands.

“And what am I supposed to do with that?” xe growled.

“I didn’t think you were *supposed* to do anything.”

“I mean why did you bring any of that up? What’s the point of saying all that?”

“Point? Does there have to be a point? I said it because it seemed relevant. You said what you thought, I responded. That’s all.”

Cory leaned xir head back and closed xir eyes.

“Well it sounded like you were trying to convince me of something.”

“That wasn’t my intention. I don’t want to change the way you think or what you want. I just didn’t want you to be unaware of a possibility and then be disappointed. I don’t know if us leaving here together would be the perfect solution to all your problems. It might. I just want you to be prepared. I don’t think you can perfectly predict that kind of thing either.”

Cory went bitter, annoyed to have his ideal poked and damaged. Because if that wasn't the solution to everything, then what else could be? With no immediate answer as he chewed his own teeth, he crossed his arms and turned his head toward Ae.

"Well what about you? Aren't you looking forward to getting out of here again? Or are you going to miss it and want to come back?"

Ae tilted his head thoughtfully.

"I don't know. I've never wanted to go back to a place I've already been. But this is different. There are new people all around who all taste different."

"You don't hate it yet? You don't hate how stupid and how horrible everything is?"

"I find it hard to hate something that seems so inconsequential. I've never been trapped here the way you have. I know your hatred and your anger. I can see the world through your eyes and the way you feel makes perfect sense to me. But I haven't developed an anger of my own. And I didn't learn to understand myself by contrasting who I am with what this world is and tells me I should be. I agree that a lot of things here are nonsensical, and it seems like a horrible place to live permanently, but nothing here can hurt me the way it can hurt you. And that's why any anger I have felt here has been on your behalf. And I do want to help you evolve and leave here. I do. But I think Zoe has a point when she says anger is part of your identity. You might feel strange or incomplete without it."

Cory's face contorted, angry brows pushing down on an expression close to tears. He sucked in a breath through his nose and his bottom lip trembled. Then he rubbed his face with both hands.

"I don't *want* to be like that. I want to be able to be happy. I want to be a version of me that doesn't depend on comparing myself to everyone else. And I think the best chance I have at that is getting out of here. You're the only one I've ever felt real with. When it's just us, I feel

free. Peaceful, even. And I don't know, maybe you're right, but maybe I'll be able to let go of all this anger for good if I actually get away from all the things that make me angry. Maybe I need to get away from the drug to get rid of the addiction."

Ae looked at xem thoughtfully, and with a soft smile e nodded.

"Yeah. Maybe."

Cory breathed a few times through xir nose then wiped xir eyes. Xe couldn't tell if it made xem feel better talking about the possibilities of that future or more depressed, since there was still no guarantee xe would even get the chance to find out what it would be like. Did talking about it make it feel more possible, or even more out of reach?

Xe blew out a long breath.

And then Ae was right next to xem, eir body draped in an unnatural form, stretched like dough across the center armrest so e could lean eir head on xir shoulder and curl eir fingers in between xirs.

*//I don't know what's going to happen in the future,// the tendrils of eir soul impressed on xem as they rippled within the car. //But I want to savor every second I have here, with you. I don't want to let whatever might happen later prevent me from enjoying right now.//*

Cory leaned xir cheek into Ae's hair and squeezed eir fingers with xirs.

*//I wish it could be that easy for me.//*

*//So do I.//*

Cory didn't know what time it was, but xe suspected Aki would be bringing Vio out shortly. Well, with just a little bit of time on xir hands, maybe xe could practice some of that focus on the present moment. So xe closed xir eyes and took in a slow, meditative breath, trying to clear xir mind of everything except the sensation of Ae's presence, eir hand, eir hair, the weight of eir head.

The way e didn't breathe. How inhumanly still e could be. Eir lack of body heat.

Xe tried to focus, but xe had to keep swatting away the expectation that at any moment, xe would be interrupted by a knock on the window. Xir own mind distracted xem with the intention of being prepared for the sudden—

*BANG!*

*BANGBANGBANGBANG!!!*

Cory jumped. Xir eyes sprang open.

“What the fuck?” xe said, screams from inside loud enough to reach xir ears.

*BANG BANG BANG!!!*

“Holy shit, is that a *gun*?”

Ae sat up straight too and sent eir tongues toward the building, dipping into the walls like they were water.

“Yes,” Ae answered.

And when e turned eir head to look at Cory, xir whole stomach flew up into xir throat. Xe had never seen an expression of horror on eir face before, not until that moment.

“What?”

Ae didn't answer. In that absence, another round of *BANG!*s pierced the air, and Ae dove out through the solid car door and shot toward the bar.

“Ae!”

Xe didn't call for em to wait. Xe didn't want em to. Instead xe cursed the clunkiness of the human body. Unlike Ae, xe fumbled to get out of the car as quickly as xe could, and running felt as slow as a nightmare.

## CHAPTER 9

“Vio . . . Vio . . . It’s time to go.”

The music saturating the bar was like water, surrounding Vio so evenly it became unnoticeable. It was just a comforting pressure that soothed his unconscious, allowing his conscious mind to focus sharply. Anything else had to swim down into the depths to reach him.

Aki’s voice was distant and watery at first, and even that only after her fingers on his sketchbook alerted him to stimuli outside his tight field of vision.

He looked up.

Aki smiled.

“Hey,” she greeted loudly to cut through the thick noise. “It’s time to go.”

He looked down at the sketch of a decaying corpse sewing a freshly-peeled face from an unseen victim into place over its own and wordlessly closed the book. He packed it and his pencil bag into his backpack and stood up. Aki did too, then stepped out first so that Vio could walk closely behind her as she carved a path toward the door.

Vio moved tensely with his arms tucked in and his backpack set like a shield against his shoulders. He stared hard down at Aki’s feet as he moved with her, taking calculated steps to keep the space between them short without ever bumping into her. His vision shrunk down to a tight field so he could only see her. With his concentration occupied, the music again became a watery background. His jaw was clenched tight. Just a little longer. They would be outside soon. He just needed to keep walking.

When he couldn’t anymore, the pain in his ears and head was the first thing he noticed. It felt as if someone had swung two pans against his skull, one on each side. His brain couldn’t process it at first. He knew it was pain, but it took a moment to understand the cause. Such a sharp, loud sound it was.

*BANG!!!*

Instantly after that came the burst of screaming. Then more skull-crushing explosions.

*BANGBANGBANG!!!*

He was going to push his palms against his ears, but Aki turned and, for the first time, touched him.

Not just a touch.

She wrapped herself around him and pushed him down to the ground beneath her. As he dropped, his body felt staticky, like layers and layers of funny bone tingling stacked together, his brain a kaleidoscope of plasma globes tumbling and slipping through each other.

Pain and discomfort. They weren't even conscious thoughts—he had none of those—they were only what he knew. Everything else evaporated, the chaos surrounding him incomprehensible. Explosions and screaming and movement existed, but to him, it was all a blur behind the mile-wide wall of agony.

Made worse by how difficult it was to breathe.

Not just because Aki was lying on top of him—weak, gasping for air, and calling his name with a blood-covered tongue—but because there was a hole in his chest. He couldn't discern any of that though. Such details were too much to take in.

Pain and discomfort. That was as much information as he could manage.

So he lay there, choking on his own blood as it filled his throat from his punctured lung and spilled around him on the floor from his back, seeing nothing and hearing nothing and thinking nothing.

Soon he would feel nothing as well.

\*

Vibrations of panic collided and clashed within the walls, a tumultuous pool for Ae to swim through to reach Vio and Aki. Their familiar waves stood out to Ae against the rest, making them easy to find. And e could see the damage to their organs and blood vessels, the abnormal electrical signals to their hearts.

Ae knew what it meant. They were dying.

As humans did, fragile, ephemeral creatures that they were.

But these were *Ae's* humans. And e hadn't been expecting to confront this loss just yet. Sojourning here, Ae had learned to appreciate time and the separation of present and future in a way e never had, and this was something e had been expecting to happen *later*.

Fear.

No, *panic*.

Ae was feeling *panic*.

They were there, but soon, very soon, their souls would be snuffed out. Without their bodies, their souls would be like leaves detached from the roots. Unable to sustain themselves, their soul vibrations would fade until they finally went still.

Ae didn't want that.

Ae absolutely, positively, *did not want* that.

But as Ae hovered around them immaterially, e knew as well as anyone that *want* had no power.

Ae had no power.

Instead, e had despair and fury. And this time when e felt them, it was on eir own, not vicariously through another.

//No.//

Such strong emotions saturated the vibrations of eir soul in a way that could not be made beautiful—not yet, if ever. They spread out raw and jarring, uncomposed. Blaring alarms, not melodies. Screams, not lyrics.

//Ae,// Aki's soul called, sensing eir presence. //I don't want to die.//

Of course she didn't. Why would she?

Ae's soul shrieked.

//I don't want you to die either.//

Aki's lungs gurgled and spasmed in a desperate attempt to collect enough air through the blood.

//I don't want Vio to die. I don't want Zoe to die. I don't want anyone here to die. No one here should die.//

Ae didn't care about the rest. Eir soul didn't shriek for them.

//I don't want to die. I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die—//

Sensing Aki's grief, Vio's distress and dissociation, and both their pain, Ae's vibrations grew faster and and sharper.

//Then don't! Fix it! Fix yourself! I could do it, you should be able to too!// Ae warped and slipped inward toward the vibrations of Aki's cells. //Pull your blood back into its place! Seal these holes! Get the electrical pulses back in order! It's so simple! Do it! You should be able to do it!//

Helplessness. Frustration. Indignation. Ae was a scream that embodied them all.

//Fucking do it! *Do it*, Aki! Fucking pull yourself together! It's so fucking simple! Aki!

AKI!//

//I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die—//

//You don't have to! I'm telling you! I can see everything that needs to be done and you can do it!//

//idontwanttodieidontwanttodieidontwanttodieidontwanttodie—//

Ae screamed a harsh scribble of erratic vibrations. Aki wasn't listening. Wasn't even going to try.

//FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!//

Only a second or two had passed, since time was different to a soul's consciousness, but it would be seconds or minutes that measured the time remaining, so that wasn't much comfort. Desperation intensified eir frequency.

//FUCK FUCK FUCK FUUUUCK!!!!!!//

It was right there! E could see exactly what needed to be done! Why? Fucking *why* did Aki have to be fucking *human*??

She was going to die.

She and Vio were going to die and there was nothing—*nothing*—Ae could do to stop it.

Nothing! Nothing nothing *nothing NOTHING!!!*

FUCK!

FUCK!!!!

FUUUUCK!!!!

Ae expanded in a blast of vibration waves blurred by speed and screamed again.

//AAAGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHNNNO!!!!//

Fury evolved into defiance and rejection.

Desperation into ferocious determination.

//NO! YOU. WILL. NOT. DIE.//

And Ae slipped emself inside, pushed emself against the vibrations that made the substance of Aki and Vio's cells and demanded, with every expectation of obedience, that they do as e willed.

*//YOU. WILL. NOT. DIE.//*

Ae willed it. As if Aki and Vio were part of emself. Aki's blood was Ae's blood. Vio's lung was Ae's lung. All their molecules and atoms e was free to manipulate as e chose.

And e chose to sip up the blood from the floor, each drop and cell of it, back into its proper vessel. E chose to sew the wounds closed, undoing the damage completely as if reversing time.

*//YOU. WILL. NOT. DIE.//*

They would not die. They would not. They absolutely would *not*.

That was Ae's conviction as e conducted their atoms and molecules and electrical waves and energy according to eir own design, stealing power from the guidance of this world's nature. Blood would flow as Ae determined. Wounds would heal as Ae determined. The forces of physics here were nothing against Ae's determination. Nothing. *Nothing*.

Aki would live.

Vio would live.

And the shooter . . . the shooter . . .

When the work was done, Ae withdrew eir waves from those of Aki and Vio, relinquishing control of their bodily functions back to nature, now that e could once more trust those rhythms to keep them alive and well. And then e manipulated eir own waves to transform into those of matter and knit eir usual puppet back together. The first round of shots had just finished. The crowd was a mix of bodies crouched into bundles and others stumbling into and

around each other as they scrambled to flee—all screaming. All screaming hysterically, the sound waves of their voices deepened by the panicked pounding of their hearts.

Ae stood up, leaving Aki to keep shielding Vio under her, saying nothing but impressing upon her with assurance, //You don't need to be afraid anymore. I know now. I finally know what to do.//

The shooter was close, clear within sight, standing at the mouth of the entrance where the ID-check desk was stationed. Everyone had darted as far from him as they could get, giving Ae an easy path. There was nothing particularly noticeable about him. He was dressed averagely, like anyone else. His normal brown hair was cut short. Average height. Average build. White skin tanned by the sun. No wonder he hadn't raised any suspicions on the way in.

He was in the middle of changing magazines—of his Ruger P89, Ae discerned, without any real interest—when e called out to him.

“Hey.”

Ae sent the sound waves of eir voice directly to his ears, cutting through the tangled mess of all the rest, fast and clean as a bullet.

He jumped, thinking that there was someone right behind him, leaning over his shoulder to his ear.

“Over here.”

He whipped his head around in a few directions until he finally caught sight of Ae.

“Hello . . . Spencer.”

His brows furrowed, confused why he could hear Ae so clearly in a room saturated with screaming. And then secondly why e knew his name.

Ae began to saunter toward him, eyes set on his unblinkingly.

The shooter flinched and pulled up his loaded gun.

*BANG!!BANG!!*

Two bullets that should have pierced through Ae's body stopped in the shallow end of eir skin, lodged with the butts still exposed to the air. Ae kept walking, slowly, so slowly, so he could see the bullets drop to the floor.

The pulses of his shock made eir soul shiver with delight. Ae smiled and licked the bottom edge of eir teeth.

His heart sped up and his breathing deepened.

His hands tightened around the gun to stop the shaking.

*BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!*

Ae caught the bullets—in eir stomach, eir shoulder, eir forehead—and let them drop one by one to eir feet.

“What the fuck?” e heard him say.

Ae tilted eir head and widened eir eyes to circles, whites visible all around the gold irises.

“Try again?” e chuckled.

His arms shook and his nostrils flared with each breath.

Ae held eir arms out in invitation.

“Come on, you can't miss.”

He tried to take a step back but his legs wouldn't obey.

Ae arrived right in front of him and gently, tenderly put eir hands over his. Stroked his knuckles. Smiled at him seductively as e pulled his hands until the barrel was pointed against the center of eir chest.

“You still have five bullets left,” e murmured. Then e opened eir mouth and extended a sharp, black tongue that curled up to sensually lick down the center of eir lip and teeth. Then eir

eyes went wide again, whites shining against eir black skin. “You never know, maybe the tenth will do the trick.”

When e grinned, eir teeth were gruesome. Jagged and crowded and far too numerous.

His heart was pounding so fast e thought he might faint. That wouldn’t be any fun.

One of Ae’s hands melted so e could coat his trigger finger like chocolate syrup.

“Come on,” e murmured charmingly. “It’s what you came here for, right? *Shoot.*”

His eyes were wide, blue paler than a sunny noon sky. Ae caressed his hand softly.

“Shoot me,” e whispered.

As sweat beaded and dripped from his pores, the creases in his forehead, and the burgeoning wrinkles in his twenty-seven-year-old skin, Ae closed eir eyes while leaning eir head back. And then e pushed his trigger finger down.

*BANG!!*

An extra burst of screams erupted.

*BANG!!*

And another. Ae didn’t even recoil against the force of the bullet.

*BANG!! BANG!!*

There was only the flash and the explosion—and the responding screams.

*BANG!!*

*Click, click click . . .*

Ae lowered eir head and opened eir eyes. The shooter was looking at eir chest, whimpering and shaking his head rapidly.

“Holy *fuck. Holy fuck.*”

Ae sighed softly.

“Oh well.”

All five bullets clattered to the wood floor and rolled off in different directions.

“Guess that wasn’t enough.”

Sweat dribbled down from his forehead and nose and neck. E could see the blood vessels in his eyes throbbing.

“Got anything else to try?”

His breathing was fast and shallow. As were the vibrations of his soul. So many tall, thin spikes of fear clustered tightly together like a coat of fur.

“No?”

Ae’s watery hand flowed off of his while the other glided up the back of his shoulders to his neck.

“Well then.”

As eir left hand expanded like a net against the back of his head, eir whole right arm retracted into eir shoulder until it was just an undulating knob.

“I guess that means this is the end”—e enhanced eir sound waves inside his eardrums when e murmured viciously—“*Spencer.*”

The volume of his name inside his skull shocked him into a deep gasp, and that was when the bulb of Ae’s shoulder bloomed open, releasing a geyser of black streams that shot out and wrapped tight around his face.

And drilled into his ears.

Flooded his mouth, nose, and throat.

Seeped in under his eyelids and through his pores.

And in the time a snap soundwave could only begin to expand, Ae entered into every cell of his body. Every atom. Every vibration of matter. Suffusing him with emself and connecting to every wave with the force of will.

Ae saw the fullness of his soul as e invaded it.

Ae saw in his memories that had led to this moment. Ae saw how hurt and debilitated he was from a breakup with his longtime girlfriend, who he had been stalking ever since in the hopes of winning her back, only to have that hope dashed at seeing her dating a girl now instead. Ae saw how his crushed ego had evolved into anger to protect himself from feeling inadequate. Ae saw how he had followed the two to Crooked Lines tonight and had sat drinking in his truck until the inhibitions melted away and his motivation to go in was set free.

And e didn't care.

Ae didn't care about his reasons. Ae didn't care that much of his anger and entitlement had been taught and cultivated from his early childhood. Ae didn't care how his emotions had been stunted from full development by a social cage of masculinity. Ae didn't care that his disposition was exacerbated by the alcohol circulating in his system and that sober he could be a "decent guy".

Ae didn't care that those vibrations of his soul were malleable and could be tuned in different ways with different influences, that he could evolve to think and feel and behave differently if given a chance.

Ae only cared that right here, right now, he had come with an intention to harm, and that he had hurt eir friends. Broader circumstances meant nothing, because even with those, he was still just human. He was inconsequential to Ae. But he had *made* himself consequential by forging a connection between them, via the line of a bullet's path from his gun through Aki's heart to Vio's lung. To Ae, that was very consequential.

And with no higher authority to mediate, Ae decided the consequences on eir own.

He was in eir grip now.

Meaning every wave of his existence was susceptible to eir manipulation.

He was only just beginning to scream when, with a newly awakened instinct, e flicked the vibrations of eir will like lightning throughout the entirety of his body—and broke everything.

To Ae, it looked like the surface of a pond, disturbed by multiple rocks crashing through it and the resulting waves colliding with each other in a frenzy until they all cancelled out. From the outside, it looked like a grown man, in an instant, puffed into a humanoid collection of dust, then translucent mist, then nothing.

There was no particle of him left, not a single speck of ash to dirty the floor. All the waves of his existence—down to the subatomic vibrations of his mass and the musical tones of his soul—had been brought to a final rest.

It happened in plain sight where anyone in the bar could see if they were looking, but Ae wasn't thinking about them. E wasn't thinking about being seen by anyone except Spencer—up until the very moment he couldn't see anything anymore. Ever.

Besides, everyone else in Crooked Lines was so pumped with adrenaline and norepinephrine from panic that the ones who had been watching would doubt their own senses—what they saw made absolutely no sense, so they would rationalize it away. Surely their brain must not have interpreted the input signals correctly.

Ae's arms wriggled and slurped until they were condensed back down into human shapes, covered by eir black denim jacket.

And Cory was standing in front of em, just two steps away from the spot that had been occupied by a killer.

Xe stared at Ae with brows high and lips parted. Ae met xir eyes and felt the trembling in xir soul as xe wondered in silent awe, //How . . . ?//

Ae would give xem the answer, but first.

“AKI!”

Ae turned and Cory looked past em to see Zoe dropping down to her knees after fighting her way through the crowd.

“Are you ok?” she asked frantically, exploring Aki’s body quickly with her hands in search of any injury. “How’s Vio?”

“We’re ok,” Aki said, pushing herself up to sit on her knees as well. She looked at Zoe, and emotion gushed up from her stomach and chest into her eyes. She had been so scared. So scared that she was going to die and never see Zoe again. To see her now—the relief and joy were painful. Tears poured down her face as she began sobbing, and the two grasped each other tightly.

But the sound of screams and cries of pain cut their moment short.

Aki pulled away and looked around the room to see clusters of people surrounding victims bleeding on the floor. She didn’t know how bad their injuries were, and she didn’t know if they were all still alive, but she knew how scared they were. She could feel their fear and their pain fill the air as thoroughly as music from the speakers always did. They screeched against her soul, causing twinges in her nerves, flexes of discomfort from her hair follicles down to the pit of her stomach and the back of her skull. Nausea churned in response, the kind so thorough that throwing up wouldn’t help.

Her breath was ragged and her body shook. But she forced herself to move. She twisted to look behind her and called out, “Ae!”

Ae was already looking at her, now with Cory close by.

Aki wiped the tears out of her eyes, but it didn’t help. They kept coming. So she ignored them.

“Heal them too!”

Ae could feel Aki's meaning: *All of them! Everyone!* Ae shifted eir eyes to the crowds. Many people were too distracted by the wounded among them or their own adrenaline-induced hysteria to notice em, while others were in fact staring at em with the same confusion that had frozen the shooter on his feet.

“You can do it, right?” Aki asked desperately. //If you healed *us*, then surely . . .//

Ae returned the gazes of those staring at em with bored indifference.

//Do you really want me to?//

Ae wasn't personally interested in saving anyone else, but if it would stop Aki from being in so much pain . . .

//YES!// her soul wailed back.

Well, all right then. That was all there was to it.

Although, wait. No.

Ae realized, if e did heal them, then it would fully finish the work of undoing the shooter's existence. Undoing the results of his actions here would erase any legacy he might have left behind, and the spite in that thought made eir soul smile. Ae decided. Ae would undo his will with eir own, undo his tragedy with eir own miracle.

With eir eyes on the huddled masses, people crouched and hiding behind flimsy barriers and lying on the floor as their blood seeped into the wood pores, Ae extended eir soul toward them, tongues seeking out the flavor of physical pain in their vibrations.

And e found them.

Twenty bullets had been fired, two rounds of ten. Half of them had been wasted on Ae emself, but from the other half, eighteen people had been hit. Crowded spaces made each shot more efficient.

Of course, the only shots that had *really* mattered to the shooter were the ones he had aimed first—at his ex-girlfriend Natalie and her current girlfriend, Amani. The rest had just been to continue the addictive sense of power.

Ae connected to them all, not just tasting the souls anymore, experiencing but not disturbing. Ae extended the reach of eir will from the boundary of emself and attached it to those vibrations e intended to control. E took over the momentum of their composite waves and directed them to move this way and that, to flow against natural physics, until blood was returned to arteries and veins, bones were sealed smooth, organs were whole, and open flesh was stitched closed.

When all hearts and lungs were in a condition to function on their own, Ae severed the connection between emself and the others and reeled eir tongues back into an amorphous nebula. Even before e had finished, the astonishment in the room was palpable. The wounded all felt their pain vanish and began examining themselves, while those around them stared wide-eyed, some gasping, some shouting expletives, others with mouths open silently.

Ae had no interest in them though. Even if some of them were clear-headed enough to believe what they had seen, it didn't matter. It never had.

And now, it mattered even less.

Ae looked to Cory at eir side. Xe was taking in the confused scene, dumbstruck, as people's voices overlapped into a cloud of noise. Xe couldn't make out what any one person was saying, but xe could tell just by looking.

*"Where'd the guy with the gun go?"*

*"What happened?"*

*"Wasn't I shot?"*

*"Weren't you shot?"*

*“How the fuck did that happen?”*

*“What the fuck is happening?”*

*“What the fuck is that person?”*

Xe turned to Ae and saw that e was already looking at xem. And e smiled. Not one of eir mischievous smiles, but a sincere one.

Xe was too stunned to make sense of it, and Ae couldn't help being amused that xe still kept forgetting how easy it was for xem to just read eir thoughts.

Well, it should become natural to xem soon.

Ae passed xem and crossed the distance to Aki, who along with Zoe was holding Vio. He was still lying on his back, spaced out, with each of them on either side and lifting his head off the floor. Ae knelt down next to Aki.

“Thank you,” she said. //For helping all of us.//

Ae didn't have any response for that. It hadn't felt like performing any huge favor. The effort on Ae's part was not at all proportional to the amount of gratitude e felt from Aki. And e wouldn't have needed thanks anyway.

“We'll take Vio home now.”

“Will he be ok?” Zoe asked. “He looks completely seized up.”

“I can help him when we get outside.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Trusting in Ae's confidence, they held Vio until Ae's viscous arms had spread like a pool beneath him and then lifted him up smoothly in a black blanket. They stood up together, and Aki and Zoe looked down at Vio, whose eyes stared blankly upward.

By that time, other patrons were rushing out, taking advantage of an open opportunity to go. Ae headed back toward the main entrance too. Cory had been pushed away from the mouth of the hallway as people crowded and crammed in. Ae didn't slow eir step. E just transformed part of emself into the vibrations of glass so transparent it was invisible and formed a barrier around emself and Cory, manipulating its shape to forcibly move anyone in the way and stop anyone from getting too close. The ones who noticed that they were being pushed or obstructed by an invisible force grew more perplexed and wondered, as they pressed their hands experimentally against it, whether to keep going or try a different direction.

At the door, people scattered in every direction, and Ae kept the barrier up so no one could bump into them. At the car, Cory unlocked the doors and opened the one behind xirs for Ae to put Vio inside, extending eir arms like wet clay to set him upright in the seat. He was limp, so Ae kept a membrane around him for support, allowing him to stare forward at the driver's seat without slumping or falling.

"Is he ok?" Cory asked.

"He's overloaded," Ae explained, sensing the hyperactivity in his vibrations. "He's in a severe state of stress, and his mind has shut down to protect him from even more stress."

"What do we do?"

"Normally, you would just give him as much time as he needed to calm down. But we don't have to wait."

Ae stood curled against the door frame while Cory watched with xir arm set against the roof of the car. Unlike before, Ae didn't just feed Vio eir vibrations to induce a natural response. This time, Ae peered straight into his limbic system, the glands in his brain and body, the hormones in his bloodstream, and adjusted them directly. It was easy now, taking over vibrations

under the domain of someone else's will. What had once been an idea that had never even occurred to em was now so obvious and simple.

All Ae had to do was extend the reach of eir will, and anything could be eirs to change.

Like those neurotransmitters, fragile little chemical compounds that e broke up and dissolved away.

Like the amygdala and hypothalamus, meshes of neurons that needed repairs from the overstimulation.

Like the electrical pulses in his muscles and nerves, waves of energy that e conducted back into a normal rhythm.

His body was so pliable—they *all* were. Oh, the possibilities. The *potential* . . .

Ae had to force emself to not get too far ahead.

“Vio,” e called quietly.

Cory leaned in to see better. Vio began blinking as his brain reconnected to the input receptors in his senses. He took in the sight of the car, then turned his head to look at Cory and Ae. Then he furrowed his brow before turning his eyes down to his chest. Slowly, he touched where the bullet wound—and pints of spilled blood—should have been. The fact that they were missing seemed his main focus, while the black membrane framing his legs and sides up to his neck didn't bother him at all.

“Hey, how're you doing? How do you feel?” Cory asked.

Vio looked up at xem again.

“I'm confused,” he answered slowly.

Cory nodded, accepting that that was an obvious answer.

“Sure. But do you *feel*? I mean, physically?”

Vio rubbed his chest a little then looked at his hands, confirming that they were clean.

“Fine?” he answered, uncertain if that could actually be true.

“Good. That’s good,” Cory said before looking at Ae with a chorus of wonder surging deep within xir soul.

Ae could tell Vio was wondering *how* he could be fine, but then another thought interrupted.

“What time is it?” he asked suddenly.

Cory turned xir wrist and read the watch peeking out from under xir jacket sleeve.

“About ten-ten.”

Stress appeared visibly in his face, but Ae expanded the membrane e had made of emself to wrap around him like a thick blanket.

“Don’t worry,” e said while brushing through his soul with soothing vibrations.

*//Don’t worry.//*

“You’ll be all right. I can promise you that.”

Vio looked up at Ae, the dizziness ebbing under the comforting weight of the blanket.

“You’ll see.”

As e looked back at Vio, beside em, Cory felt a flicker in xir spine at hearing Ae make a promise. E had never done that before, since, as e reasoned, e couldn’t know the future. But now, e spoke of it with unwavering confidence.

*You’ll see . . .*

Ae looked at Cory.

“Shall we?”

Xe blinked.

“Yeah. Sure.”

Ae glided into the car, eir body moving like spilled water, flowing over Vio and resolidifying in the front passenger seat, except for the part of em that remained wrapped around Vio.

Cory closed Vio's door and stepped in through xir own, then started up the car.

There was some messy traffic clogging up the parking lot as people continued rushing to get away. Ae kept soothing Vio—//Don't worry, don't worry . . .//—as Cory navigated through the tight squeezes and awkward angles and sudden cutoffs all the way to the street.

It cost them seven minutes more than it should have, but Ae didn't let that cause Vio worry. He didn't need to suffer unnecessarily.

//Don't worry,// eir soul hummed as e suppressed the excitation of his amygdala.

Cory couldn't help glancing at Ae every so often as xe drove, but otherwise, xe left em and Vio alone. Ae's blanket hugged Vio snugly, adding a sense of safety and calm that eir interference in his body chemistry allowed. So by the time Cory rolled up by the curb outside Vio's house, he was cozy enough to fall asleep.

All three looked toward the house and saw his mom standing by the door, lit harshly by the old, yellow porchlight, and saw her start to stomp down the steps before Cory had even come to a full stop.

“Shit,” Cory groaned under xir breath while rolling xir eyes.

Continuing to inhibit any brain activity in Vio involving fear, Ae set a hand on Cory's shoulder and said, “I'll handle this.”

Cory looked at Ae, and curious to see what else e intended for the night, xe replied simply, “Sure.”

Ae smiled as they heard Vio's mom start shouting, “Do you know what *time* it is? I don't care what excuse you have, you are *not* going out again for a *month*! You hear me Victor?”

Ae flashed eir teeth at Cory when eir smile reached its peak before opening the door and stepping out.

“Hello,” e greeted pleasantly from across the roof of the car.

Cory twisted around to take a look at Vio and saw that he looked completely relaxed as he sat bundled in what looked like a black sleeping bag, staring out the window toward his mom. Guess there was nothing to worry about there. Xe twisted back to watch Ae move leisurely around the front of the car to meet with Vio’s mom.

“I already said, I’m not interested in whatever excuses any of you have!”

“Oh don’t worry, I don’t have any excuses for you,” Ae said breezily. “And I’m also not interested in any excuses *you* have.”

“That *I* have?” Offense made her voice shrill. “For *what*?”

Ae arrived on the driver’s side of the car, and Cory could see through the window a mischievous glint in eir eyes.

“For being an absolutely *terrible* mother.”

“Ex-cuse me?”

“No, I won’t,” Ae said, eir eyes laughing. “It’s inexcusable.”

Her face went red, the heat in her body a substantial force against the chill. She heaved a few breaths, her outrage contrasting Ae’s smooth composure.

Then she scrunched her nose and lifted her chin authoritatively, even though she still had to look up into Ae’s face. “You know, I’ve decided that I don’t think my son should spend any more time with you.”

Ae answered the declaration with an amused smile.

“No?”

“No. Absolutely not. Not with you or *that* one in there!” she added, flinging a finger toward Cory. “I don’t think either of you the kind of people I want him being influenced by!”

“No,” Ae agreed, eir smile growing. “You want him to stay under *your* influence. You want him to hate himself and be afraid of you forever.”

“That is *not*—You have no right to talk to me like that!”

“I don’t care about *rights*. I *can* talk to you however I want, and I *will*. *Ahp!*”

Ae lifted a hand just as she was about to spit out a protest, and with the aborted sound of a single syllable, her lips vanished, the skin between her nose and her chin melting together until smooth. Her eyes went wide, and she began screaming through her nose as all her fingernails scrambled to find the opening that should be there, poking and scratching to no avail. The skin wouldn’t give.

“Shhhhhhh,” Ae said, taking one of her hands and squeezing it as e looked directly into her eyes. As the whites around eir gold irises began to glow, e murmured, “It’ll be over soon.”

E reached up with eir second hand and caressed her warm cheek. When she tried to turn away to run, Ae’s hands burst into sticky ribbons that strapped her in place.

“You are cruel,” Ae cooed with a hushed voice. “For so long, you’ve been hurting someone I care about. That’s very unfortunate for you. Because now, I’m going to make sure no one ever hurts him again.” Ae ran a few ribbons tenderly through her thick, dark hair and combed the loose strands away from her sweaty face. Ae smiled sweetly. “I know you’d just say I don’t have the right to do this, but as a parent in this world, you had a *duty* to treat your child better. Or so I’ve heard a *respected* therapist say.”

Ae could hear all the prayers speeding through her mind, flurries of words so rapid even a Hispanic tongue like hers couldn’t have kept up, some calling for salvation and others calling on faith to drive away demons in the blessed name of *Jesucristo*. To Ae, the clean and springy

syllables and the audible breaths she sucked in and blew out through her nose were equally pleasant.

“Maybe that god you believe in would forgive you if he existed,” e continued, speaking as if sharing a secret with a lover. “I know you think so. But I won’t. And I wish there was a hell I could send you to. But I guess this moment of ours will have to be good enough—before I clean the earth of your despicable existence.”

The tenderness in Ae’s ribbons as they caressed her face suddenly turned rough, the ribbons forming a tight grip across her mouthless cheeks and under her chin. Ae leaned in closer so their noses were nearly touching, and eir eyes widened to an unnatural size.

“Now do me a favor,” e murmured as the ribbons began to ooze upward into her flaring nostrils, “and *suffer*.”

Her eyes bulged with strain as Ae forced more and more of emself into her nose, causing her to gargle as she struggled to breathe around em. This wouldn’t be instantaneous, not like with the shooter. No, he had been the warmup.

Her eyes turned pink and cracked with bright blood vessels as her lungs filled with Ae’s tarlike substance, and Ae stared right into them, demanding pain. E left just enough room to allow her enough oxygen to stay conscious, because she needed to feel what came next.

Ae then reached in for her bones, not with eir body but with eir will. Ae hooked into every molecule of their composition, from skull to phalanges, and with one small flick, each bone endured one clean break. It was so easy. *So easy*.

The woman screamed—or tried to. Some of the sound and breath managed to rise up from the tar clogging her throat, but not much. But Ae could feel it. E could feel all the vibrations of pain in her nerves as each one fired and crackled splendidly.

As more sweat bubbled out of her pores, Ae snapped eir will like a whip and inflicted another break in each piece of bone e had made.

The woman's muffled voice reverberated harder against her throat, and Ae's eyes stared mercilessly as tears ran hard from her red eyes into the black substance surrounding her face. Ae also used eir mucous body to keep her standing upright, since she no longer had the ability to do so on her own. But while the blanket around Vio was soft and snug, the straps taped around her in winding layers were tight and stiff.

Ae snapped eir will again to break each new piece of bone. The woman was losing consciousness from pain and lack of air, so Ae intervened, stimulating her brain to alertness and morphing some of emself into oxygen, feeding it directly into the capillaries in her lungs that e was blocking.

“Just a little longer,” e murmured, soft as a lullaby.

So the woman felt it clearly when Ae broke her bones again. And then again. And again. On and on and on until her bones were like grains of sand shaped by glass containers. The woman was in so much pain she didn't have a coherent thought anymore, so it didn't matter what Ae did next. At that point, it was just a matter of personal satisfaction. But that was enough. So Ae transferred the focus of eir will from the demolished bones to the skin hidden under eir black bandages, and snapped against the molecules of her cells, slicing them apart over and over and over until her flesh looked like bleeding stacks of printer paper.

Veins bulged against her neck as she kept screaming, the force curdling Ae's tar in her lungs and throat, but her voice didn't even carry far enough to reach Cory's ears through the car window.

Ae didn't bother to read into her soul. E didn't care. E only wanted the pain and fear. It didn't matter to Ae if the woman might have repented. Her life and soul weren't worth saving. Or at least that was Ae's assessment, which was the one that mattered here.

And now that e was fairly certain e had made her suffer worse than anything she had inflicted on Vio, e could bring this to an end.

Ae crammed more of emself down her throat, stuffing her lungs completely full and plugging her entire nose with thick globs so no air could pass through. It didn't take long from there for her body to spasm, and Ae let nature take its course, enjoying the view as her brain went dark and her soul went quiet, the vibrations like a wisp of steam fading and fading the higher it rose until it vanished.

Ae's straps now held a husk. Ae could feel the energy of the cells composing it, but they no longer served to power a consciousness or soul. E didn't need the body. It had no interest to em anymore. But like with the shooter, e wanted to finish the work, so e spread eir will throughout the whole web of the corpse's mass and in an instant, dismantled it. Like pressing down on the string of a harp, e forced all the vibrations in the subatomic particles to go still. And when e let eir straps coagulate back into humanoid limbs, there was nothing wrapped inside them anymore.

With the show over and no longer captivated by the spectacle, Cory opened xir door and stepped out slowly, leaving the door open as xe came up next to Ae. Xe examined the space to confirm that indeed, Vio's mother was gone. Xe looked around the street to see if there was any sign of witnesses, but there were none that xe could make out. It gave xem some relief, though xe had no clear, articulate reason for why. Xe knew some people at the bar had seen what Ae could do, what did it matter if more saw it here? But xe didn't think on it.

Xe looked back to Ae, to eir avatar that had returned to its usual form, and licked xir lips.

“So . . . you killed her, right?” xe asked.

Ae made a soft, dismissive snort.

“I didn’t *just* kill her. Killing is easy. Anyone can kill.” Ae looked steadily into Cory’s eyes. “I *undid* her.”

Cory stared at Ae, a slew of questions clamoring in xir mind. Xe could have asked how then, but xe looked over xir shoulder to the car and decided to ask first, “Is Vio ok with that?” Xe could see through the window that Vio was still sitting comfortably bundled inside Ae, but xe knew that calm expression on his face was a result of Ae’s interference. What he was thinking wasn’t clear.

“I don’t know,” Ae answered. “I didn’t ask.”

“Huh.”

“Do you think I should have?”

Cory shrugged.

“I mean . . . probably.”

“I see. It seems like such a reasonable thing to have done, I didn’t even consider that he might not want it.” And Ae still didn’t look worried about it, but e did add, “I won’t undo *your* parents unless you want me to.”

That set off the first pulse of adrenaline hammering hard against xir chest. Xir parents. Xir parents. What xe wanted. Xir mind drifted off in a haze of new possibilities that were too overwhelming to consider thoroughly just yet. Xir eyes glazed and xir hearing tunneled down to just the sound of blood in xir ears. What . . . What *did* xe want? Did xe . . . did xe *want* them to be . . . did xe want Ae to . . . *did* xe?

It was too much for xem to think about right now, and it certainly wasn't something xe could decide right then and there. Xe pushed the question aside and refocused xir attention on Ae, who was observing xir reaction with interest.

“Thanks,” xe replied, feeling awkward.

Ae nodded. “You’ll be able to do it yourself. If you want.”

Cory felt like a tide suddenly rose in xir skull, drowning xir thoughts and causing a surge in xir vision. Everything went blurry for a second and xe felt knocked off balance. Xe couldn't answer that. Xe still had no fucking clue what it was xe wanted. So instead, when xir vision restabilized, xe turned toward to car and opened Vio's door. Not needing a reply, Ae stepped up next to xem so they could look inside together.

“Hey,” Cory called softly to Vio. “You still doin’ all right?”

Vio nodded.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“You uh . . . wanna get out?”

Vio leaned his head back against the seat.

“Not really. If I go inside, dad’s going to ask me where mom is. I don’t know what I should tell him. It’ll probably be a big mess.”

“Ah. Yeah, right,” Cory said slowly.

“I can get rid of him too,” Ae offered.

“Mmmm, but if you do that, it’ll still be a big mess, because then we’ll be orphans and have to go into foster care or something.”

There was a pause. Cory glanced between Vio and Ae. Despite what he said, Vio still didn't look concerned. He looked like he just was just considering the facts logically. Ae had eir lips pursed to convey on eir face that e was thinking.

“So,” Ae asked conversationally, “do you wish I hadn’t gotten rid of your mom?”

Vio sighed through his nose.

“No. I just wish things could be simpler.”

“Fucking tell me about it,” Cory muttered.

Out of curiosity, Ae asked, “Should I have let you do it yourself?”

Vio shook his head. “No. I don’t think I would have been able to do it. Definitely not like *that*.”

“Why not?”

Vio looked down to his lap. “I don’t think I have it in me to hurt anyone. That’s just . . . not me. But, I don’t mind that *you* did it.”

Ae smiled. “Anything for you.”

Vio wriggled a little, sinking lower into the seat, getting himself more snug and comfy in his bundle. “I still don’t know what to tell my dad.”

“Hm.” Ae crossed eir arms and tapped eir heel against the ground. Cory looked toward the house to see if there was any sign of someone else coming out, but xe saw no movement through any windows. Only specks zipping around the porchlight and a few changes in color from the living room as the TV screen switched from scene to scene. Xe looked back to Vio and Ae.

Ae shifted eir eyes to Cory for a moment, then e unfolded eir arms and bent toward the car. E pivoted so e could sit next to Vio, but rather than sitting on the seat, e pressed eir back against the door frame and sat on nothing. Ae didn’t need any support, not when e could repel the force of gravity from eir mass.

“Listen,” e said, eir head turned toward Vio. He looked back at Ae, aiming his gaze at eir collar so he could hear without the distraction of eye contact. “You don’t have to worry about

your dad. You and Cory don't have to worry about anything ever again. Because I'm going to get you out of here. So you don't have to tell him anything. You don't have to go inside if you don't want to, not tonight or ever again. You don't have to do anything at all that you don't want to. None of it matters anymore."

Vio stared at Ae, the impossibility of words too good to be true clashing with his trust in em. He didn't understand how it could be possible, but he also didn't understand how it was possible for Ae to have erased his mother right in front of his eyes, and yet it had happened. Ae didn't lie to him. He knew that. And that had to trump something that he *didn't* know. That was the reasoning that made his mouth spread in a smile.

"I want to stay with you."

Ae smiled back.

"Then you're staying with us."

Vio's teeth showed as his smile grew wider.

"Do you want to try a hug now?" Ae asked. "This seems like the time for that, right?" E turned to look up at Cory for confirmation.

Cory nodded, because xe was tingling with excitement. *I'm going to get you out of here.* Ae had said that. From Ae, those words were as good as a promise, a guarantee. Ae was going to get xem out of here, out of this world, out of this life. Xe could have hugged Ae hard enough to split em in half.

"Like a ghost hug?" Vio asked.

Ae nodded.

"Yeah. Like a ghost hug."

Vio's heart fluttered with the thrill of facing something scary but the hope of a reward for going through with it. He took a few deep breaths, swallowed, then nodded.

“Ok.”

“Ok. Here. Look. You won’t feel a thing. See?” Ae held up eir hands, and after adjusting the waves of their composition, e proved that they were no longer solid by passing them through each other. Vio grinned, and Ae could tell his hands were flexing excitedly underneath eir blanket. Ae kept it around him for his comfort as e leaned into the car and extended eir arms to wrap around him.

He held still so e could aim correctly, and he watched as e rolled on top of him and pressed eir shoulders against his shoulders and eir cheek his cheek. Ae was right, he didn’t feel anything, only the constant weight of the blanket that was still solid around him. But he could see em, and it was a relief to have em so close without his body reacting in alarm. It was a relief to not have to worry about wriggling in discomfort against someone whose feelings he didn’t want to hurt. It was a relief to not have to worry about Ae’s hair tickling his nose. It was a relief to not have to worry about dissociating to survive.

His throat began to ache and he swallowed again to make it stop. Then he sniffled and blinked back a thin layer of tears.

“Thank you,” he said in a tight voice.

Ae pulled away and hovered over him, and e held up a ghostly hand against cheek. He didn’t even feel the slightest tingle.

He sniffled again and pushed his arm up against the blanket to dab at his nose.

“I’m ok now,” he said, and then pushed against the blanket again with both arms. “You don’t have to keep this on me if you don’t want to.”

Ae smiled.

“It’s no trouble for me. You tell me what *you* want.”

Vio looked over at Cory like he was expecting judgment for seeming childish. He didn't think of himself as childish, but he was used to others, like his mom, thinking he was. Which wasn't fair. It wasn't his fault that others considered things like wanting comfort a trait only small children should want.

But he didn't see the scorn he had so often seen on his mother's face in Cory's. Xe actually looked . . . Well, xe had a soft expression, and the faintest hint of a smile, for the first time that Vio had ever seen. He wasn't the best at interpreting faces, but when he felt the vibrations of Cory's soul, he felt that the source of that face was a familial warmth toward him.

Vio tucked in his chin against the blanket and sank himself lower on the seat.

"I like it," he mumbled.

"All right. I'll leave it."

Ae gave him another smile before spilling fluidly out the door and back onto the curb next to Cory. Xe was about to ask what next, when Vio quickly lifted his head again.

"What about Aki? And Zoe?" he asked to Ae. "Are you going to get them out of here too?"

Ae put a hand on top of the car and leaned eir head down toward him.

"Of course. I can't just leave them here by themselves."

"What do you mean 'by themselves'?" Vio asked.

Cory assumed he was just taking Ae too literally, as he sometimes did. Of course e just meant leaving them behind when the three of them left.

"I mean leaving them alone here when I undo everyone else."

Cory felt xir brain glitch into technical difficulties for a moment at hearing that, especially in such a matter-of-fact tone.

"Everyone else?" Vio repeated.

“Right.”

Cory shook xir head.

“Wait. What?”

Ae looked at xem.

“What?”

“You’re just . . . going to . . . do *that*”—xe pointed to the last spot where Vio’s mother had stood, had *existed*—“to . . . *everyone*?”

“Not like *that*,” Ae clarified. “I don’t have strong enough feelings toward everyone else to make them suffer. No, I was planning on just, *poof*.” Ae snapped to emphasize the image. “Erase them all. No pain. They wouldn’t even know it was happening. It would be too quick.”

“Wait. Wait.” Cory held up a hand. “When did you decide this?”

“When Vio asked about his dad. If erasing just one person creates so much complication, then it makes sense to just erase them all. That would simplify everything, like you both want. There wouldn’t be any confusion to clear up with people left behind, and no one would have to feel sad because they miss someone. And then the five of us could get out of here and live where we can be happy.”

“Well—wait—hang on though,” Cory stammered. “Why do we have to erase anyone else if we’re going to leave?”

Ae tilted eir head.

“I thought you would agree with this. You know better than anyone how much suffering there is here. I thought you wanted to end all of that. Even if we leave, there would still be people here and the systems they suffer in would go on and on.”

“Do you really care about that?”

Ae sighed thoughtfully and shrugged.

“In a distant way, I think it’s a pretty lamentable existence for anyone to be trapped in, let alone an entire species. And now I can free them. It wouldn’t be hard to do. Barely any work at all.”

“Ok, but . . . I just . . .”

Cory felt xir equilibrium sway and xe had to focus to keep xir vision from blurring.

“You’re bothered by this,” Ae observed with some surprise.

“Well, I mean . . .”

“You don’t like humans,” e pointed out.

“No, but, that’s, you know, that’s *personally*. I don’t like being *around* people or, you know, dealing with them. But like, I mean . . .”

“You’ve believed for a while now that Earth would be better if humans were wiped out.”

“*Yeah* but. I mean I *do* but. But that’s, I mean . . .”

Words like *unfair* and *wrong* and *unjust* kept dancing on xir tongue, but xe knew such reasoning wouldn’t resonate with Ae. But xe had no other clear reason for why xe felt overwhelmed. It was just how xe felt. It was easy to think that killing off humanity was a good thing when xe knew it wasn’t possible. Now that it was, suddenly ethical questions and concerns came gushing up in xir soul with high volume. The weight of all those lives didn’t seem so light anymore.

“. . . It feels like too big a responsibility.”

Ae considered xem thoughtfully.

“You don’t have to be responsible for anything,” e pointed out reassuringly. “I’m the one who would do it.”

“Yeah but, I mean, we’re . . . I mean, we’re so *close*. If you do it, I’d feel like I did it too.”

Ae's soul reacted with a hum of pleasure, and e reached out with both arms and pulled Cory into an embrace. Cory hugged back and found that eir body was firmly solid again. Xe could hug with all xir strength and xe wouldn't even make an impression. Ae ran the fingers of one hand up xir neck and into xir hair, black blending with black, and leaned eir head against xirs.

"You have a strong sense of justice," Ae said softly. "That much I understand. That's the bond you have with other life instead of personal relationships. That's why even though they're not your friends, you still feel anger on behalf of others."

Ae squeezed Cory, then pulled back so e could see xir eyes.

"I know before, when we thought you would break free on your own, we looked forward to just leaving. But now we have the option of doing more than that. We don't have to leave everything the way it is. I thought, since you hate the way things are so much, you would want to do something about it if you could?"

"Well . . . yeah," xe agreed. "I do."

"I want to understand," Ae said, inviting xem to explain.

Cory worked xir jaw in thought. "It just seems kind of extreme to jump straight to *genocide*. I mean in real life."

"But why?" Ae asked, foregoing a dive into Cory's soul to practice communication through words. "Isn't not existing better than being miserable?"

"I don't think that's something I should decide for anyone else. Besides, if I really thought that, I wouldn't have bothered living this long."

Ae considered xem thoughtfully. "You would feel guilty undoing human life," e summarized.

Cory nodded. “Yeah. I think that’s the kind of ‘might makes right’ mentality that I hate,” xe objected. “I don’t want to have power and have everyone else at my mercy. I just want people to stop being shitty, you know?”

“I don’t think they will,” Ae said. “They way humans have built their world reinforces and perpetuates it, and so they start learning it from a young age. To stop it, every individual would have to unlearn so much, and the world they live in would have to suddenly function completely differently, otherwise there will always be some vestige remaining that can grow back.”

“Yeah,” Cory said, unable to disagree. “But still. It doesn’t feel right.”

“I’m not saying it’s *right*,” Ae pointed out. “It’s just what I think is *good*, based on my understanding of things. There’s no objective way to decide what is right or wrong. We only have our own feelings to decide by. And it seems to me that erasing suffering would be good.”

“Well yeah, erasing *suffering* would be good. But you’re talking about erasing . . . *everything*.”

“Yes,” Ae agreed matter-of-factly. “That’s the only sure way. Humans themselves are the root of their own suffering.”

Cory stepped backward and rubbed xir forehead. Then xe blew out a breath through pursed lips and raked xir fingers through xir hair.

“I don’t know,” xe said, shaking xir head. “This is too big for me. It’s too much.”

Ae stepped forward to get close to xem again.

“We don’t have to. I only thought of it because I thought we would agree. It’s not something I want to do because I have a strong opinion, I was only thinking about what would make you happy.”

Cory took in as deep a breath as xir lungs would allow and leaned xir head back to blow it out toward the black sky, murky with clouds made dark blue by the moonlight. Xe let xir shoulders sag and then xe dropped xir head down into xir hand to rub xir forehead again. Then xe took another breath in and out through xir nose and looked at Ae.

“Let’s go back to Crooked Lines,” xe suggested. “Since we’re done *here*. I feel kinda bad leaving Zoe to clean up the mess over there.”

“Ok,” Ae answered with a nod, easily following Cory’s change in subject.

“Ok,” Cory repeated, and xe waited for Ae to make the first move back to the car. Xe watched as e dove gently in through xir open door, eir torso and legs moving like poured liquid until e reformed in eir own seat. Cory first went to Vio’s door to shut it, and xe took a glimpse of Vio’s face to see what he might be thinking about the conversation. But his expression was indecipherable. He seemed too deep in thought for even a tiny bubble of a clue to rise and break open on the surface.

When Cory closed xir own door and set xir hands on the steering wheel, xir palms were slick and cold. Xe pretended it was because of the chill that xe needed to rub xir palms against xir thighs a few times to warm them up, but even as xe did it, xe knew there was no point. Either passenger in the car would have been able to read in the outermost layer of xir soul that xe was rattled.

And of course Ae knew. E didn’t even have to reach out with a tongue from eir own soul to know. Cory’s soul was radiating it far enough to wash over em in thick waves. So before xe could start the car, e reached out with a hand to cover xirs.

“I’m sorry,” e said in a low voice. Cory first looked down at their hands, then up to Ae’s face. With a serious and direct gaze, Ae said, “I caused you stress. That wasn’t what I wanted.”

Cory tightened xir jaw and swallowed, then flipped xir hand under Ae's so xe could fold xir fingers in between eirs and squeeze. "I know. It just suddenly hit me how *big* the world is."

"It's really not, but I think I know what you mean."

"It's too complicated."

"The way you're thinking about it is complicated."

"I just wouldn't want anyone else deciding when my life ends for me. I'd rather they actually do something to make life *better*."

"Is that what you want to do?"

Cory shook xir head. "No, I don't think I have it in me to get that involved. I'm already tired just thinking about how much work that would take." Xe sighed. "And I'm sure that makes me shitty and selfish to just do nothing, but I don't feel like I'm in any condition to work on anyone else. I'd need for *me* to feel right first before I could even think about that."

"Well," Ae said, rubbing eir thumb along xir hand, "you're the one that matters most to me. I want to help you feel right. For *you*, not anyone else. That's all I care about."

Cory rubbed Ae's hand in return, and xe could feel the frequency of xir distress smooth down into calm. Xe leaned forward, and for a minute, xe and Ae just sat with their foreheads pressed together, letting their souls match the slow quiet around them.

Then Cory took in a slow, deep breath. Xe released it through her nose slowly as well, and reluctantly opened xir hand to let go of Ae's so xe could grab the key in the ignition. The engine revved, and Cory got them moving, pulling up into a neighbor's driveway to turn around and head back the way they had come.

## CHAPTER 10

On the way, Cory left the radio off to give xir mind space to work without distraction. Xe set the heater on low since the night air was chilling to a point that xir jacket wasn't quite enough for comfort. Xir hands kept clenching and unclenching around the wheel as xe steered on autopilot, only half-seeing the road in front of xem.

Meanwhile, next to xem, Ae was sunk down into the seat, eir legs bent up and boots set against the glove compartment, staring out the window at the scenery as it passed by. Tonight in particular, Ae felt like viewing it through human eyes, and so shaped eirs to have an interior structure that matched Cory's, with all the same cones and rods and muscle fibers in the iris. E wouldn't be here much longer, after all. It seemed reasonable to get in some last human experiences before they took off. So e saw the trees and buildings and dim sky through dilated pupils and held up a hand to compare the night to the color of eir skin.

The color black resonated with Ae, and wanting more of it, Ae applied eir focus and summoned a liquid gloss to rise from eir pink fingernails and turn them all a smooth, pure onyx. Ae turned eir hand and bent eir fingers so all the nails came together, then turned eir hand back and spread eir fingers out again. Ae smiled, then brought the hand down so e could stare out the window.

Cory noticed the movement of Ae's hand from the corner of xir eye and watched the color spread from eir cuticles to the tips. Convenient. Xe looked down as xe spread xir fingers out from the wheel. The black on xir own nails was chipped into ragged abstraction. Nail polish couldn't stand up to the kind of work xe put it through in the course of a week. Well . . .

*I'm going to get you out of here.*

. . . whatever, xe wasn't going to need nail polish where they were going. Xe curled xir fingers back over the wheel.

“So,” xe said slowly, so as to not break the quiet, only push it open. Ae turned eir head from the window to look at xem. “You wanna . . . tell me what’s changed? I mean like, why you can ‘undo’ people all of a sudden now? And what exactly does that *mean*?”

Ae lit up with excitement, and as e sat up straight, eir legs melted and wriggled until they reformed bent against eir chest and inside the tight ring of eir arms, eir thick boot soles on the seat of the chair.

“Sure, I’ll try to explain it,” e said before tapping eir finger in thought.

Cory asked, “You don’t want to just give it to me?”

“No, not yet,” Ae answered with a smile. “Let me try to put it in words first. *Then* I’ll give it to you.”

“Sure.”

It was still a game for Ae, figuring out human language, how to make it do what e wanted it to do. Though, the same was true of any human. Even Cory, who made an art out of expressing xemself through lyrics, found words a puzzling challenge. That was the nature of it, xe supposed. The rules made it intelligible and thus useful, but at the same time, restrictive. There was the constant tension between wanting to break out of the rules and be able to convey exactly what you had in your head, inarticulate and raw, and the need for the rules to give you something to work with at all. Words were necessary but frustratingly imperfect. But, better an incomplete understanding than no understanding at all. Maybe.

The difference was Ae could always quit the game whenever it became so frustrating that it wasn’t fun anymore, when the restrictions of the rules outweighed their usefulness. Cory wasn’t sure Ae understood just how lucky e was to have never known the kind of pain those limits caused when they were inescapable.

“Ok,” Ae began. “So you know how everything is fields and waves, right?”

Fields and waves. Yes, Ae had allowed xem to understand that when xe had seen life and existence through eir perspective. Every particle was just a disparate wave in a field, and different fields were like pools occupying and overlapping in the same space, and the particles and forces from different fields interacted, creating matter and mass and energy in the process.

“Yeah,” xe said.

“Ok. Well I realized something. There’s another kind of field I wasn’t aware of before, besides matter and ‘souls’ and energy and all that. I found it when I saw that Aki and Vio were dying.”

“What field?”

“I guess you’d call it . . . ‘will’.”

“Will?”

“Yeah. I never really thought about it before, but it’s my will that gives me the power to control my own form. I can move because my will gives me control over the substance of my soul. They interact so seamlessly you don’t usually distinguish them, but they’re not the same thing. And I realized that I can expand my will beyond just my own substance and let it interact with other things. And then I can control things according to my will the same way I’ve always been able to control myself.”

Ae looked at eir nails again, looking thick and varnished even against such sparse light, and adjusted their length, extending them past the fingertips and playing with the shape—flat, round, tapered, sharp.

“You know, in retrospect, it’s actually not surprising that it took me so long to realize all this. It feels intuitive now, just stretch the normal distance of that force to however far I want it to go. But doing something like that never occurred to me before. Out *there*”—Ae looked up to the sky toward a distance beyond human comprehension—“no one would think about violating

another being's integrity like that. There's no reason to. No desire to. And even if anyone heard the idea, it would seem fundamentally impossible. Out there it's . . . *unthinkable*."

When Ae had first encountered the suggestion here on Earth that one person could influence another in any way, it had been as bewildering to em as the very existence of Ae was to Cory. Not just bewildering, but distasteful. Exerting power over others implied a superior and an inferior, concepts that didn't exist in the Infinite. Not only that, but they seemed *comfortable* with the idea of power, hierarchies built around superiors and inferiors. How humans could be so different from the rest of the universe, Ae didn't understand.

"And it's not something I want spreading out beyond this little bubble here. Not that I think any of us would ever do this to each other or *want* to do it, but it's more relaxing to not even know it's possible. It still kind of disturbs me. But, at the same time, I have to say, in *here?*" Ae tapped the top of a bent knee and smirked. "I like it."

"Because you don't think of humans as your equal, right?" Cory clarified. "The way you think of people like *you* as equals."

Ae tapped eir knee again.

"No. I really don't. The species that taught me the concept of hierarchy sunk to the very bottom of it in my mind."

"You never thought of *me* as inferior," Cory pointed out.

"No, but I didn't even get that concept until I met you. Before I got a better picture of humans, I *did* think of them as equals. They were beings with autonomy to be respected, just like any other. And then, when I started thinking of humans as unlikable, I never really thought of *you* as human. I've always thought of you as a soul afflicted with humanity. I've always thought of you as my equal and that you should be like me completely."

"Afflicted with humanity," Cory repeated with a dry laugh. "Yeah, I feel that."

“I’ve been so frustrated,” Ae continued. “I’ve wanted to help you, but I always thought any help I could give would have to be indirect, like how humans exert *influence* on each other. I thought ultimately, you would have to evolve on your own.”

Cory pushed against the back of xir teeth with xir tongue.

“And is the reason I can’t because I don’t have a will like you do? Is that why I haven’t been able to control *my* substance?”

“No, you have it too,” Ae said definitively, eir gold eyes direct on xem. “I can see it.”

“Then what’s wrong? Why can’t I use it or control it?”

“Because it seems to be disconnected in humans.”

“Disconnected?”

“Yeah. Let me see . . .” Ae tapped eir knee with a blade-tipped nail. “You know how you can’t control the muscles in your heart or stomach? It’s all involuntary and operates on its own even though it’s part of you.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s *kind* of like that. It’s like a muscle attached to you, but that you can’t really feel it or take conscious control over it. And the way you’re wired, there’s no way you *can* take control of it, like how there’s no way to consciously control your stomach muscles. The wiring just isn’t there. It’s just going to do what it’s going to do. And your will is there, like how your soul is there, but they’re kind of dormant, not really doing anything. And you’re not aware of either of them because they’re beyond the scope of your perception. Like how your eyes can only see a very limited scope of things. You can’t adjust your vision to see the cells of your skin or certain kinds of light waves or radio waves, and you can’t adjust your mind to notice your own soul.”

Cory squinted into a scowl.

“Why the fuck would we be designed that way?”

“There’s no ‘why’. The universe doesn’t make plans, things just happen. Really *nothing* about your design makes sense, not just that. This”—Ae gestured up and down Cory’s body with one pointed nail—“is just the result of a bunch of random interactions among the natural forces of this bubble.”

“Yeah I know. But then, if there’s no wiring, does that mean I *can’t* become like you? Am I stuck like this?”

“No.”

Ae reached out a hand, eir arm becoming longer so that e didn’t have to move the rest of eir body, and by the time e set eir hand on xir shoulder, eir black nails were retracted back down to the fingertip.

“If I exert my will on something, I can change it however I want. If I exert my will on *you*, I can *make* the wiring.”

Cory brought the car to a stop at the red light facing xem in an intersection with only one other car. Xe looked at Ae, feeling xir body bubble like water just starting to boil.

“You’ll be able to control your own substance, just like me. You won’t be human anymore.”

Because as far as Ae was concerned, “human” just meant a soul trapped in a prison composed of a specific formulation of DNA. There was nothing special or philosophical about it. Though e supposed e could understand humans wanting to find or create some kind of meaning in that prison, otherwise existence would be too depressing.

Cory gripped the wheel hard and breathed in deep enough to fill xir lungs to the brim. Tremors of excitement in xir eyes made xir vision blur for a moment.

“Fuck yeah,” xe moaned softly.

“Me too, right?” Vio asked.

Both Cory and Ae looked to the back to see him.

“Yes. Definitely,” Ae confirmed. “And Aki and Zoe.”

“Mm.” Vio shuffled his shoulders under Ae’s blanket and nodded contentedly, then said, “The light’s green.”

Cory whipped back around and saw that Vio was right. Xe looked into the rearview mirror and saw a few headlights in the distance, but too far away to start honking their horns impatiently. Xe set the car in motion.

“So how’d you figure all this out?” Cory asked.

Ae’s arm reeled back down to its usual length.

“Stress, I guess. I saw Aki and Vio dying, and I got so stressed out that I just kind of . . . did it. I exercised that force past the usual boundary without really thinking about it. But now that I’ve got a handle on it, I don’t need stress anymore, which is good. It wasn’t an enjoyable experience.”

Worth it, yes, but still not enjoyable.

And Ae wasn’t like humans. The composition of human brains made memories unreliable, distorted, unpredictable things, some ephemeral and others inescapable, some provoked seemingly at random and others lost and never to be recovered. For Ae and others like em, memories were seamlessly and perfectly preserved as parts of the soul. Ae would never be able to forget what it was like to feel fear or fury—and not just as an impression, but the vivid and visceral experience in all its detail, both internal and external.

But that was all right. However unenjoyable, it was significant. E wouldn’t want it to have never happened because of the results it brought about—including in emself. E was the way e was in this moment because of the moments that had come before.

Which made Ae wonder about . . . how e *could* be now had things been different, if the moment in Crooked Lines hadn't happened. If they had ever reached a time when Cory was about to die naturally of old age—if Ae had been able to see that the vibrations of xir body were slowing down, worn out by time—would e have reached the same realization then? Ae believed so. The thought of losing Cory was even more distressing than facing the very real threat of losing Aki and Vio. Ae had no doubt that when the time had come, e would have realized the truth.

But if things had worked out that way, Cory would have lived all the years up until then in a dismal state, seeing xir life as a constant, bleak flow toward an even darker end. So in a sense, Ae owed the shooter a portion of gratitude for bringing about eir revelation sooner.

But e wasn't going to feel bad that he was already gone and unable to receive it.

"I don't remember anything that happened," Vio reported.

"Do you want to?" Ae asked with the tone of an offer.

Cory looked up into the rearview mirror to see Vio considering silently to himself for a moment. Then he said, "Mmm, not really."

"Ok. Well there's no expiration date," Ae explained. "You can change your mind any time."

Vio didn't say anything, just sunk his chin into the cushiony blanket.

"You warm enough back there?" Cory asked to the mirror.

Vio again said nothing but nodded so Cory could see.

"Ok. We'll be there in a few minutes."

Vio nodded again then began pressing his face into the cushion, first straight down then rolling side to side to feel Ae's fine, plush texture against his skin. Cory left him to it.

“So,” xe began, glancing at Ae before pressing the brakes for a stop sign. “When were you thinking of . . . fixing me—us?”

Xe didn’t know why xe used the need to look both ways to hide how excited xe was, but xe did. Xe wasn’t used to performing exuberance—xe wasn’t used to *feeling* exuberance—but xe shouldn’t have felt shy or self-conscious about it in front of Ae. Even as xe did it, xe felt pathetic, but some habits were hard to break.

“Whenever you want,” Ae answered as xe pushed the car forward into the intersection.

“So, you could do it tonight?”

“I could do it right this second.”

Xe lost sight of the street when xir vision blurred in a wave of adrenaline slamming against the back of xir eyes. It cleared up in another second, but xir hands took longer to unclench from their tight, reflexive grip on the wheel.

“You just tell me when you’re ready.”

Cory breathed in deeply through xir nose and pushed xir eyes extra wide for a second to stay focused. Xe swallowed then said, “Kay.”

Xir heart beat hard the rest of the way while xir mind buzzed with anticipation, and Ae let xem feel it without interrupting. Then they pulled into the parking lot, and Cory saw that the only cars there were Aki’s Accord and Zoe’s Jeep Cherokee. Cory had never seen the lot empty, not at night at least. It was vaguely eerie. Xe drove slowly all the way to the front and parked as close to the main entrance as xe could get. Xe shut off the engine and for a brief moment, xe considered having Ae fix xem right then.

Why not? Why stay confined any longer than xe had to?

But at the same time, it felt like something that deserved a more ceremonious appreciation. It was a big deal, surely it shouldn't just . . . *happen*. Like it wasn't the most climactic moment of xir life.

Maybe that was a silly thought, but at the same time, if doing it would open the door to immortality, then it wasn't like xe had to rush it.

So he pulled the key out of the ignition and looked around xir seat.

“We're here.”

Vio's reply with his face sunk into Ae's blanket was, “Mm.”

Cory got out first and opened Vio's door for him, while Ae encouraged him to get out by melting the blanket away from him and back into eir human body, like ooze dripping in reverse. Cory locked the car when they were all out, and they went to the door in a cluster. Cory found that it was locked, but Ae didn't hesitate to exert eir will on the opposite side to not just unlock it, but also open it for their convenience. Cory cast a quick glance at Ae before stepping in first.

“Zoe? Aki?” xe shouted when they reached the end of the hall where the ID-check desk waited for their arrival, empty and dark.

The stage to the right was empty too, and all the chairs had been set to hang upside down from the tables. The only place with life was the bar counter where Zoe and Aki were washing glasses together on the other side.

“Cory?” Zoe answered in her megaphone voice.

“Yeah. And Ae, and Vio,” xe replied, beginning the approach through the obstacle course of tables.

“What? Why's Vio with you?”

Cory raised xir brows high and took a deep breath.

“Ehhhhh, it's kinda complicated.”

“Ae said I don’t have to go home anymore,” Vio said with none of Cory’s uncertainty.

“Oh *did* they?” Zoe said, folding her arms on top of the counter and leaning forward.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Just like that?” Zoe asked curiously.

“No. Ae undid my mom first, *then* they said I could stay with them and Cory if I wanted to.”

Zoe and Aki both scrunched their brows and looked from Vio to Ae. By then the three were closer to the counter, and when he arrived, Vio mimicked Zoe’s arms by folding his in front of hers and setting his chin down on top.

“Ae *undid* your mom?” Zoe repeated, fishing for an explanation.

“That’s what they called it.”

“Called what?” Zoe looked at Ae directly again.

Ae responded by folding eir own arms too next to Vio’s and saying, “I made her stop existing. There’s nothing of her left.”

Both Zoe and Aki stared at Ae. Ae stared back, not exactly *innocently* but with no qualm in eir conscience.

“I’m sorry, *what?*” Zoe said with a shake of her head. “Are you . . . Are you *serious?* Are you being serious right now?”

Ae tilted eir head.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because that’s crazy!”

“How so?”

“You just. You’re saying. You’re saying you just showed up at the house—and *killed* a person?”

“More or less.”

“You can’t . . . You can’t *do* that!”

Ae scrunched eir face in confusion.

“Yes . . . I can. I just told you I did.”

“*No*, that’s—I mean you *shouldn’t* do that! That’s what that *guy* came here and did!” she protested, flinging a whole arm toward the ID desk where the shooter had stood. “Or came here to do!”

“Yes,” Ae agreed, “but he had a bad reason. I had a good reason.”

Zoe pulled her arms in and built a temple with her fingers against her face. She took in a deep breath with closed eyes and on the exhale, she pressed her palms together and pointed all ten of her straight fingers at Ae.

“Listen. Don’t you think that shooter thought his reasons were good reasons?”

“I *know* he did.”

“So how does saying your own reasons are *good* reasons justify your actions when someone else can say your reasons are bad reasons?”

“Because I don’t care what anyone else says. My reasons are good to *me*. That’s what matters. Someone else can say my reasons and actions are bad, but that doesn’t mean I have to agree with them. It’s all up to interpretation.”

Zoe closed her mouth and sucked on some of her teeth with her tongue, then turned to Vio.

“How are you doing, Vio? Are you ok?”

“Yeah,” he said, still with his chin on the back of his wrist. “I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Zoe looked at Aki, who took a deep, uncertain breath, then looked back to Ae first.

“So what’s the plan exactly? Where’s he going to live now?” she asked.

“He can live and go wherever he wants to,” Ae answered.

“How? Won’t his *dad* wonder where he is? Doesn’t he still have to go to school? Are you just going to hide him at Cory’s house?”

“I don’t know what his dad will do, but that’s not really relevant. And no, he doesn’t have to go to school if he doesn’t want to. He can do anything and go anywhere.”

“How?” Aki pressed. “This isn’t as simple as you’re making it sound.”

“I actually think it’s *very* simple. I just have to help him get rid of his humanity. Without that, he’s completely free.”

“Do *what*?” Zoe asked.

Next to Ae, Cory wiped xir face hard with both hands and sighed so hard xir chest sunk in.

“Fuck, I didn’t think we were going to get into this so fast.”

Zoe rounded on xem. “What do you *mean*? Ae kills Vio’s mom and that’s not the first thing you came here to talk about?”

“No,” Cory moaned. “I thought we’d come here and see if you needed any help cleaning up.”

“Well, thanks, that’s thoughtful, but no. There wasn’t really much more than usual to clean up. We just had to call Mike and Kim to let them know we were closing early, and I told Ian to go home because he looked pretty shaken up. Now *back* to . . .” Zoe fumbled with something invisible in her hands until she threw them up in futility. “*Everything*. What the fuck’s going on with you?” she asked pointedly to Ae. “First Aki and Vio, then the shooter, then

everyone, now Vio's mom? You *never* did this kind of, I don't know, like, *magical* healing and destruction thing before. Something's changed."

"Yes, something has," Ae agreed smoothly. "I know the extent of what I'm capable of now."

"Which is *what*?"

"I can manipulate anything I want to. I just have to override the force of nature with the force of my own will. I always thought my will only applied to myself, but I've learned that I can apply it to anything. So I can heal something that by natural processes should die." Here Ae paused to look directly into Aki's eyes, then turned back to Zoe. "And I can reach into the most fundamental substance of something and squash the energy until it stops."

Zoe stared at Ae for a few seconds, then raised an eyebrow.

"That's kind of terrifying, you know."

"It shouldn't be for *you*," Ae replied. "I like you."

"Thhhanks but, that still seems like way too much power for someone to have. It's like you're a god or something."

"Oh?" Ae asked thoughtfully. Ae didn't know what being a god was supposed to feel like, but e supposed since gods were just a creation from the imagination of humans, it would feel like whatever humans *thought* it would feel like. Ae emself didn't feel like a god, and the whole concept still seemed odd and unnecessary. But if Zoe thought eir ability put em in the range of god-dom, e deferred to her human expertise on the matter.

"Yeah," Zoe confirmed.

"I see. And that bothers you?"

"Kinda, yeah."

"Even if it's me?"

“I mean, like I said, it seems like too much power for *anyone* to have.”

“I see. So you wouldn’t want to be able to do what I can do?”

Zoe paused at that and stared at Ae for a long moment, and everyone else remained quiet with curiosity.

Eventually Zoe pushed her lips to the side and tapped on the counter a few times with her knuckles, then clucked her tongue before saying, “Ok *look*. Yeah ok, maybe I wouldn’t be against having that kind of ability myself, but that’s because I know myself and I know my intentions. I know what my ethics are and how I’d use that kind of power. I can’t know anyone else’s intentions or ethics, so I’d be scared of anyone being able to do literally anything they wanted.”

“Even me?”

“Well, when you tell me you’ve just come back from snapping someone out of existence, then honestly? A little bit.”

“I see. So you don’t feel the choice I made was justified.”

Zoe took in a deep breath and looked at Ae hesitantly.

“Are you sure you won’t get offended if I tell the truth?”

“Offended?” Ae asked, genuinely confused. “No. I’m asking you how you feel. I *want* the truth. You’re allowed to disagree with me, I don’t take offense at that. I just find it interesting.”

“Right,” Zoe said, extending the syllable by a few seconds. “Ok, then here. I’m an anarchist. I don’t believe in the death penalty. I know Vio’s mom is a huge bitch, but there are other ways to deal with bitchery than just offing a person.”

“It is the *easiest* though.”

Zoe started an instant reaction, but caught herself before more than a quick “Ah!” escaped her throat. Instead she reined herself in and hummed against tight lips.

“Yyyyeah, but that’s also *authoritarian*, which I’m fundamentally against. I’m into solving problems in a *communal* way, not just by stripping people of all their rights, including the right to life—except maybe in the most *extreme* circumstances.”

“Why go through all that work though, if you don’t have to?”

“Because I think it’s *right*. Doing the right thing can take a lot of work. It sucks, but that’s the way it is. And I think it’s right to help people recover from their own shitty attitudes and behaviors. Yeah they hurt people, but they’re part of our community, and if we just kill off everyone who isn’t up to whatever standards we set, then there’s not going to be much community left. We have to be willing to give people second chances and help them be better. We have to believe that people can change, otherwise there’d be no point to activism or education at all.”

Ae considered Zoe thoughtfully while next to her, Aki nodded enthusiastically. Cory stood very still, listening and observing the interactions carefully, while Vio listened with his eyes glossing over the various bottles lined up on the back wall.

“Both of you do care a lot about helping people,” Ae noted.

“Yeah. It’s kind of our thing,” Zoe agreed.

“So I guess you would both be against what *I* had in mind.”

Zoe pulled her head back and turned it to give Ae a suspicious eye.

“What’s that?” she asked, sounding like she wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Cory *knew* she didn’t really want to know, and showed it by pressing all the fingertips of one hand against xir forehead and sucking in a breath.

“I was thinking the best thing for me to do would be to wipe out everyone,” Ae said matter-of-factly. “Just get rid of all humans entirely. That seems like the least complicated way to fix things.”

Before Ae had finished speaking, Zoe’s head had already dropped slightly on her neck in incredulity, her eyes widening before blinking in the quiet that followed Ae’s words and shaking her head rapidly.

“I’m sorry, are you *serious*?”

Ae tilted eir head slightly.

“You know I am.”

Zoe stared with her mouth open, looking at Ae like the alien being e was for the first time since they had met.

“You’re serious about just . . .” She snapped her fingers. “Just wiping out an entire species. Just deciding that all on your own.”

“Yes.”

“Hoo!”

Zoe pinched the bridge of her nose while pulling in a deep breath and then blowing it out through pursed lips.

“Ho boy. That’s . . . See that’s *exactly* what I’m talking about when I say this level of ability is fucking *terrifying*.”

“I wouldn’t wipe out you or Aki,” Ae explained. “I was going to make you two and Vio and Cory like me. I wasn’t going to leave you two as the only humans left on Earth.”

“That is not even *remotely* the point,” Zoe countered with a sharp hand gesture, then insisted, “And you *know* it’s not. You said yourself that you know Aki and I care about other

people. We wouldn't just be thinking about what would happen to *us*, we'd obviously be thinking about everyone else too."

"I know you care about the wellbeing of other people," Ae agreed. "It's why you chose your professions. And I think erasing all humans would end a lot of unnecessary suffering. Humans don't like suffering. Humans don't like being in pain. Humans don't like being under someone else's authority. So if I stop that, it would be a good thing for them. Do you not think so?"

Zoe sighed to keep from groaning.

"*Technically*, getting rid of everyone would stop them from suffering," she said grudgingly. "But I think there has to be other options."

"Why would you want to consider other options when this is the simplest?"

"Because *simple* doesn't take everything into account. That kind of simple solution brings up the problem of the fact that you're punishing *everyone* for social problems they didn't create. That's not fair. You're using the fact that people are suffering because of injustices done to them as an excuse to mistreat them in your *own* way."

"It wouldn't be punishment," Ae clarified. "No human would even be aware of their undoing. They would just stop existing—instantly."

"Well it *seems* like a punishment since they have to pay a price for something they didn't do. They may not *feel* it when it happens, but it's still something being inflicted on them by an outside power without their consent that'll keep them from experiencing any of the good things they would if they kept living."

"You think the good things are enough to outweigh the inescapable suffering?"

“They’ve always been for *us*,” Zoe said, gesturing toward Aki. “And if I’d been erased as a kid, I never would have met Aki. That’s one of the best things that ever happened to me. I wouldn’t want to have missed that even if it meant not experiencing some of the worst things.”

“Hm,” Ae hummed thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

“Is this making any sense to you?” Zoe asked. “Do you understand what I’m trying to say here?”

“I understand you feel very strongly about this,” Ae explained. “The logic you’re using only makes sense in the context of your feelings. I don’t feel the same way you do about humans, which is why my logic makes sense to me. But I can understand your feelings even if I don’t share them.”

Zoe stared at Ae while rapidly tapping a knuckle on the counter.

“You really don’t care about the *billions* of people on this planet,” she said, audibly restraining herself from either collapsing into a moaning puddle or exploding from the pressure in her skull. “At all.”

Across from her, Ae stood as a model of composure in the middle of an intriguing conversation.

“Not really, no. I pity them in a vague sense, but I’m not emotionally attached to them enough to say I *care* about anyone besides the people in this room.”

“Ok, well let’s just look at that for a second,” Zoe said, tapping a finger in the air before setting the sides of her hands down on the counter with the focus of a tutor. “If you erase *everyone*, you’re gonna erase my *family*. And Aki’s family. And Zach and Gabriel and Wyatt, and Mike and Kim. *We* care about those people,” she said drawing a horizontal ring in the air to lasso the four humans together as one, “and we’d be sad to lose them. We don’t want to see them be treated like that.”

“Treated like what?” Ae asked curiously.

“Treated like . . . like nothing. Like they don’t matter. Like their lives and what they want doesn’t matter.”

“Well, they *don’t* matter to me,” Ae explained. “And I’ve always treated them that way.”

Zoe chopped the air with both hands and splayed her fingers tightly.

“Ok, but you were *ignoring* them. There’s a difference between treating people in a way that doesn’t disturb them and treating them in a way that completely takes away their autonomy.”

“I agree,” Ae said, sounding like this was mere philosophy. “And back to what you said, I don’t want you all to be sad. That’s why I healed all the people here tonight, because you wanted me to.” Ae looked particularly at Aki for a moment before turning back to Zoe. “So I want you to know that I won’t do what *I* think is the best choice because I can see it would upset you—and Cory too. I just can’t help being curious about your thoughts on it.”

Zoe crossed her arms and dropped her head to sigh hard toward the ground while swaying her weight from foot to foot a few times.

“For fuck’s sake,” she muttered before lifting her eyes to Ae again. “You really could have said that sooner.”

Ae shrugged.

“This is why talking is so inconvenient. You can only convey one thing at a time.”

“So then why didn’t you *give* me more information?”

“I didn’t want to cheat.”

Zoe sucked on her teeth again behind tight lips and drummed her fingers against her arm.

“*Oh-kay*,” she sighed. “*Oh-kay*.”

“Thank you again for healing everyone,” Aki said to shift the subject. “I would have been wrecked seeing people die like that.”

“That’s why I did it,” Ae replied.

“That’s ok, I still appreciate it. And I think it would be kind of a waste to undo all those people right after saving their lives.”

Ae shrugged.

“It wouldn’t cost me much. It doesn’t take much work either way.”

“But couldn’t you tell how relieved everyone was to be alive?” Aki pressed. “Did it not feel good to you helping them?”

“No. Not because of that, anyway. It made me feel good to know I was capable of more than I had realized before, but their relief didn’t affect me.”

Aki sighed, disappointed.

“All right,” Zoe said, raising her hands in defeat. “We can’t convince you to care about anyone. Fine. As long as you’re not going to be killing anyone.”

“Only if there’s someone you *want* me to.”

“*No.*”

Zoe chopped through the air with both hands again to point all ten fingers in Ae’s direction.

“You shouldn’t be killing *anyone.*”

She emphasized her point by making a horizontal slice with one hand.

Ae just smiled.

“What?” Zoe asked, narrowing her eyes with feigned suspicion.

Ae tilted eir head, keeping the smile.

“I like you.”

Zoe raised an eyebrow.

“What makes you say that?”

“I can feel your passion. It feels good. I like it. I may not feel the same way you do about these . . . *morality* issues in regards to humans, and I may think your feelings are a bit too much for a human to have to deal with, but I still like the way it feels.” Ae tilted eir head in the opposite direction and kept staring at Zoe. And it occurred to Zoe that Ae was blinking occasionally. E didn’t normally do that, but Zoe noticed because e was doing it much slower than a normal person would. It was like instead of forgetting or forgoing it like e usually did, e was consciously focusing on the motion of closing and opening eir eyelids.

Zoe wasn’t sure which was better.

“Well . . . *that’s* . . . something,” she said while staring back into Ae’s gold eyes.

“So,” Aki said, earning the attention of the room. “What *are* you going to do?”

Ae looked to Cory at eir side, then back to Aki.

“Well, now that I know I can, I was going to finally help Cory, and then we were going to leave. Vio can come if he wants to, or he can stay here. And if you wanted to evolve out of being humans, I’d be happy to help you too.”

Both Aki and Zoe looked at Ae with raised eyebrows.

“You mean, become like you?” Aki asked.

“Right,” Ae nodded. “If you want, I can make it so you can see everything I see, and change whatever you want.”

Both Aki and Zoe shifted their eyes to everyone else in turns to read their faces. Vio was still staring idly at the bottles on the wall, and Cory was leaning against the counter with xir hands in xir pockets and staring at the ground. Both women still had their brows raised high.

“What do you think?” Ae asked.

Zoe let a breath build up behind her closed lips then puffed it out in wordless wonder. She shook her head then looked at Aki, who was starting to grow a smile.

“We could change whatever we wanted?” Aki repeated.

Ae nodded. “Yes. It’s easy. Just reach your will out past where it normally is, merge it with something else, and take control. Make your will override the natural flow.”

“Sounds like hacking,” Vio noted without looking away from the bottles.

“And that works for *anything*?” Aki pressed.

“Anything made of vibrations,” Ae explained. “So, yes. Atoms. Light. Sound. Humans—their bodies and souls. Anything.”

The air hummed with Aki and Zoe’s racing heartbeats. “Oh shit,” Aki said with hands pressing together. “Oh *shit*! Oh my god! Imagine what we could *do*!”

“I am,” Zoe said, running a hand over her tight, close-cut hair.

“I could be the best goddamn doctor in the *world*!” Aki gasped with wide eyes. “I could cure cancer! I could cure fucking *everything*! Holy *shit*!”

“If that’s what you want, yes,” Ae agreed. “Just . . . don’t de-human anyone else, ok? I don’t want the way people think in *here* spreading anywhere else. Keep them all here.”

“Yeah, sure, ok,” Aki agreed, too excited to think too hard about anything but her own visions.

“You know, unlike you,” Zoe pointed out, “we don’t think being human is the absolute worst possible thing to be. We think it could actually be pretty great, if we can make the right kind of world.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

That was all Ae said. Ae didn’t say that it was true, that e thought being human was a sad fate to be born into. Regardless of the world they were in, humans would always be *human*, never able to hatch from their bodies as independent souls. That inescapable physical attribute would always limit them. Ae might have called that a cruelty of nature, but that would be too

personifying. Nature had no intention in its designs. Things just were what they were. But it still made humans pitiable little things in Ae's eyes. It didn't stir any motivation in Ae to work toward cultivating human happiness, but if that was what Aki and Zoe wanted to do, e would leave them to it.

Zoe slapped the counter and looked at Aki with wide eyes.

"We can clean up all the pollution! And make everything renewable energy!"

Aki gasped and hopped a few times.

"*YES!* And stop drug addiction, and end world hunger!"

"God, *yes!* Holy shit. Holy *shit*, I am *ready!*" Zoe turned toward Ae and slapped the counter with both hands before rubbing them together. "So when are we doing this?"

"Whenever you'd like," Ae said in a voice as soft as eir smile.

"*Ohhhhhh* shit," Zoe said, rubbing her hands together again and grinning at Aki, who was still hopping and clapping next to her. "We are gonna fix this place *up!*"

"Ahhhh I'm so excited!"

"Are you saying you want to do it now?" Ae asked.

"Sure! Why not?" Zoe boomed. "I got no reason to wait."

"Me neither!"

Ae didn't have any opinion on the matter. If they wanted it now, e would do it now. But still, there was just one thing e thought might be worth considering first. E turned to eir left.

"Vio," e called softly.

Both Zoe and Aki calmed their enthusiasm and also looked toward Vio, who hadn't moved from his position. Someone else might have thought he was zoned out from the conversation, maybe counting the bottles and cataloging them in his mind by color and size, but they all knew it was easier for him to pay attention obliquely.

//There's something you want to say,// Ae's soul nudged encouragingly. //You should say it.//

Vio looked down to the counter and lifted his chin off his wrist so he could trace the lines and circles of grain in the wood while he spoke.

“So,” he mumbled with his chin slightly tucked, “you two are probably going to get really busy, right?”

Zoe and Aki looked from him to each other.

“Well,” Zoe said slowly, answering first, “I mean, I don't know, actually? But I mean, we're both already pretty busy, right?”

Vio didn't seem cheered by this, continuing to run his finger back and forth along the same dark patterns while his soul exuded a dreary bass hum.

Aki leaned forward on the counter and reached out a hand to lay within his line of sight without actually touching him.

“Hey,” she called gently, “what's wrong?”

He pushed his shoulders up closer to his ears.

“You won't have time for me anymore,” he mumbled.

“Now hang on,” Aki said quickly. “Why would you think that?”

“You're going to go fix the whole world. That's a way bigger job than studying for school and working here.”

“Come on now,” Aki said, tapping the counter with her flat hand. “That doesn't mean we're going to forget you or just leave you behind. We're not going to be too busy for you, ok? You're too important to us. You know that.”

Vio began chewing on the inside of his cheeks.

“And hey, didn't you say you were going to stay with Ae and Cory?” Zoe asked.

“Ae said I could stay with them if I wanted,” Vio explained. “But . . .” He stopped tracing the lines and started picking at one tiny chink with his nail instead. “I like it here. I don’t really want to leave. I wouldn’t be able to draw out there.”

Vio kept his eyes aimed firmly down to the counter, while Aki and Zoe both shifted their gazes to Ae, who looked back at them with a placid expression. Zoe didn’t know why she kept expecting Ae to show signs of jealousy or hurt feelings. She supposed she was so used to that kind of thing rising to destructive levels during therapy that she projected it onto even an . . . an *alien* like em.

Zoe turned her eyes back to Vio, and she set her arms forward on the counter and leaned over them.

“Do you want to stay with us?”

She looked at Aki for the confirmation she knew she would get. Aki looked at her too and nodded.

Vio tilted his head to get a better view at the nick he was picking at.

“Yeah.”

Zoe pulled her arms in to set them parallel with the counter and knocked on the surface a few times.

“Well you know, we’re cool with that.”

“Yeah,” Aki agreed. “You can hang out *with* us while we’re doing our thing. If you want to.”

He stopped picking at the counter and shifted his eyes across to Zoe’s arms.

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Nope,” Zoe said, pushing her lips out and shaking her head. “You’d be one of us, wouldn’t you? It’d be the three of us, goin’ around the world like *that*.” She snapped her fingers. “And maybe you have some good ideas for how to make things better too.”

Vio’s eyes suddenly went wide and he grinned.

“Ghosts.”

Cory snorted involuntarily and quickly covered xir mouth while turning aside to laugh.

Vio instantly coiled up, his grin shrinking to nothing.

“Don’t *laugh*,” Zoe said.

Cory sucked in a deep breath with a smile still on xir face.

“What? It was funny.”

“I meant it,” Vio mumbled.

“Oh I *know* you did. And I think it’s great. I say go for it.”

Zoe looked at the thumbs up xe was giving Vio and then squinted at xem like she couldn’t decide if xe was being serious or joking—or which would be worse.

“We can talk about it,” Aki said, compromising between Vio’s enthusiasm and Zoe’s reservations. “I’m sure we’ll come up with a whole *list* of things to talk about once we get started.”

Ae released a leisurely sigh through eir nose and combed all eir fingers through eir hair. When e shook eir head, eir hair moved too slow and heavy for human-likeness, and then e picked a collection of strands and held it up to eir eye as all of it began to emit a soft, white glow.

“Well, I guess I hope you enjoy taking on that project,” e said as e observed and adjusted the brightness of the glow. “Cory and I can come back some time and see all the work you’ve done.”

When Ae was satisfied, e dropped the strands and let them join back with the rest of eir hair and its moonlight aureole.

“You’re gonna be impressed,” Zoe asserted. “You know what hard workers we are.”

“I’d love to be impressed,” Cory said, then with a shrug added, “Though anything you do is gonna make it better than it is, so.”

“Cory, I swear to god, I am going to make your jaw drop with *amazement*.” Zoe pounded the counter with a flat palm. “Forget all those other billions of people, my number one goal is to get a real fucking reaction out of *you*.” She pointed at xem aggressively.

Cory snorted softly and stuffed xir hands in xir jacket pockets.

“Whatever gets you motivated.”

“You can’t show even a *little* more enthusiasm?”

“I thought you wanted *genuine* reactions?” xe teased.

Zoe narrowed her eyes and clucked her tongue at xem.

“All right smartass. You’ll see. I’ve got *ideas*.” She tapped her temple a few times. “I’ve got a *vision*. This place is gonna turn into a fucking *paradise*. You’ll see.”

Cory sucked in a breath through clenched teeth.

“Mmm, I dunno. That sounds nice, but if there aren’t any ghosts I don’t know how I’m gonna be impressed.”

“We will *talk* about the *ghosts*,” Zoe replied stiffly, raising her eyebrows for extra emphasis.

“Oh-*kay-ay*,” Cory said musically. “I’m just *sayin’*.”

“And *I’m* just saying that if I was my mother, you’d be getting smacked upside the head right now.”

Cory made a show of taking one exaggerated step backward, away from the counter.

“Yeah, you *better* run.”

“Hey, you’re one of the few people I’d rather not get in a fight with.”

“T’s cause you’re smart,” she said smirking.

Cory had to pause then, because xe was pretty sure that was the first time anyone had ever said that to xem. Not that they were being serious with each other right now, but still, hearing it was a new experience xe couldn’t help but take note of. And xe wasn’t sure what xe would have said in response, so it was good that Zoe took another turn.

“All *right*,” she said, clapping her hands together and rubbing them. “So Ae, you mean it? We can get this going right now?”

Ae had been considering eir nails again, color after color spilling up from the cuticles to saturate the small canvases, until e decided on a vivid white that matched the purity of eir hair. The clash of such white against eir skin was almost blinding. Ae looked up when they were done and smiled.

“Absolutely.”

Zoe grinned and chuckled while rubbing her hands together.

“*Nice*. So you ready?”

Aki’s eyes went as wide as they could.

“I am *so* ready! How about you, Vio?”

Vio tapped his fingernails against the counter almost as fast as a vibration and grinned.

“*I* can be a ghost!”

Cory sucked in xir lips to keep from laughing in the background.

“Yes you can,” Zoe agreed with a pronouncing gesture. “You sure as hell can.”

Vio bounced rapidly on his feet and made a giddy sound in his throat behind his smile.

“I’m ready!”

“All right,” Zoe said with an enthusiastic fist, then she looked over to where Cory was standing. “And how about you? You ready to do it now?”

Cory pushed xir hands harder into xir pockets, stretching the jacket down from xir shoulders.

“Mmmm,” xe hesitated. “I actually think I’m gonna wait. This doesn’t feel like the right moment for me.”

“Yeah, all right,” she said teasingly. “I see you. Always gotta do things on your own.”

Cory just shrugged in vague agreement.

“All right, all right, you do you,” she said, sweeping at xem with her fingers.

“Always.”

Ae looked around from Zoe to Cory and smiled.

“This is another thing that makes speaking seem fun,” e said, using eir finger to point back and forth between them. “This doesn’t happen with the sharing I’m more familiar with.”

“Ahhh, yeah,” Zoe said thoughtfully. “That *sharing* thing doesn’t give you a chance to play around. When you’re talking to each other, you can be quick and witty, but you don’t need to do that if you’re just dumping everything down all at once.”

“Mm. It’s nice to know there are at least *some* perks to the human experience.”

“Yeah, there *are*,” Zoe insisted.

And then Aki added quickly, “And there’s no reason the human experience has to be bad. We’ll prove it.”

“That’s right. So come on, we said we’re ready, so let’s go.” Zoe used both hands to gesture a summons to Ae. “Let’s do this!”

“All right. I don’t know what this will feel like for you, so I’m curious to find out.”

“Makes it sounds like we’re guinea pigs for a mad scientist,” Aki laughed to herself.

Just the faintest buzz of curiosity colored Ae's vibrations as e looked across the counter to Zoe. Cory too was curious what it would look like, and how it would feel, so xe took a step closer to get a view of all four and watch Ae's tongues as they crept inside Vio, Aki, and Zoe. Xe thought for something so significant, there would have to be a sign. Some kind of light display, maybe. Something bright shining from inside their bodies. Or their skin suddenly sparkling. Or fireworks bursting around them. *Something*.

But after just a moment, Ae retracted eir tongues from the others so that they melted back into the amorphous nebula of soul shimmering around em. And nothing seemed different.

"So, did it work?" xe asked.

"It should have," Ae answered. "I didn't have any problems finding their wills or connecting them to their souls. But I guess," Ae said, turning back to the counter, "it's up to *you* to figure out how to control it."

"This is *weird*," Aki said first, blinking rapidly and tilting her head down almost to her shoulder. "It's like . . . It's like when you do a new exercise and then the next day you can feel muscles you didn't even know you had because they're sore. But instead of a muscle it's like . . ." She shook her head and waved both her hands in circles in the air. "Outside your body."

Ae agreed with a nod.

While Zoe and Aki both looked like they were staring into a pitch-black room, next to Ae, Vio was standing with his chin tucked against his collar. Ae and Cory could both see the energy in his soul as he explored himself, and then a moment later, his body became so transparent he was nearly invisible. He looked down at his hands and then slowly set them down on the counter—then let them fall *through* it. He held his hands there for a moment, staring at the spot where his wrists were interrupted by solid wood. He wiggled his fingers—he knew he did—

but he couldn't see them, and it made him grin. And he began running his hands up and down, in and out of the counter over and over again with a look of glee on his face.

By then, Aki and Zoe were watching him, and eventually he looked at them too. He held up a hand and walked his whole body into the bar so he could sweep his fingers through Aki's face.

"I'm a ghost," he announced.

Aki recoiled just a little, a reflex at the sight of an object coming toward her eye, but she held still when she realized she couldn't feel a thing even as she knew his fingers were passing through her cheeks.

"You sure are," she agreed. "That's really cool."

He was still standing inside the bar, so he had to hold up both his hands to see them. He exerted a vibration through his will, and they all watched as the skin on his hands began to peel away and disappear. And then the muscle beneath and the blood vessels and nerves and every other juicy bit rolled in on itself into nothing until there was only bone. Vio flexed his hands and examined with open-mouthed wonder the composition of his own phalanges and metacarpals. He turned his hands forwards and backwards to see both sides and flexed the joints again a few times before looking over them to Aki.

"I can be a ghost . . . *and* a skeleton!" he gasped.

Before Aki could come up with something encouraging to say, he sucked in another excited breath.

"Oh, look!" he said, his eyes wide. And he opened his mouth to give them an easy view to his teeth, which gradually began to sharpen. And when he set his teeth together again, they fell in alignment with a zigzag line between them.

“Heehee!” he giggled through them while clapping his bone hands. “Heeheehee! I can be *anything!*”

Zoe curled her tongue in her mouth to keep from laughing—which Cory noticed, and xe was ready to jump on her if she did—and Aki said, “That’s great. It looks like you’ve really got a handle on it already! Now you can work on your art like *this.*”

Vio’s eyes went wide again.

“Yeahhhh,” he exhaled, and then he curled his bone hands into bone fists and pushed them against his cheeks. “Do you think . . . I can *make* things too?”

“Uhhhh . . .”

In her hesitation, Vio turned to Ae, who would be the greater authority on the matter.

“Sure,” e said with a one-shoulder shrug. “All you’d have to do is get all the molecules together. Make sure all the components function so they can carry energy where it needs to go. The biology that makes a thing live is pretty easy to understand once you get a good look at it.”

Vio tapped the tips of his phalanx bones together in front of his grin.

“So it’ll be even more detailed than drawing. I get to make *all* the insides and everything!”

“You can make whatever you want.”

Vio’s throat vibrated with a high-pitched squeal as he flapped his hands frenetically in the air around his head.

Meanwhile, Zoe gave Aki a side-eye as her soul rumbled into hers.

//Now you’ve done it. He’s gonna bring all those things he’s drawn to life.//

//You’ve always *liked* his art,// Aki soul trilled back.

//It’s cool when it’s *art*. You really want those flesh-eating monster things running around?//

//Are you gonna shut him down?//

Zoe's soul rumbled with reluctance and gloom.

//nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnggggg . . .//

//Don't be such a pessimist. We can figure out a way to make it work.//

//We can give him an island to put them all in.//

//Maybe. We'll figure it out.//

Vio was too focused on his own excitement to read the messages flowing back and forth just inches from his soul. But Ae noticed what they were thinking. Ae still didn't care much what the human world turned into after this, but e did want the three of them to be in a good mood.

"You could make a whole new planet if you wanted to," Ae suggested. "Fill it with anything and everything your imagination can come up with."

Vio opened his mouth and his eyes stared up at the ceiling and into his own mind. While he was just beginning to think of the possibilities, Ae looked at Zoe, who noticed and looked back. She made a subtle nod and mouthed the words *Thank you*.

Ae winked.

"Fun," Aki said. "So Vio, are you going to stay like this?" She gestured at his visible torso still sticking up out of the bar counter.

Vio looked at her hand.

"You can touch me if you want."

"What?"

"If I'm like this, you can touch me. It won't bother me like before."

Aki looked at Zoe, then back to Vio. She slowly reached her hand out toward him, giving him a chance to change his mind. But he didn't, so her hand went through his forehead without

any reaction from him. Then she began to shape the movement of her hand to follow his outline, as closely as she could, running her palm down his hair and cheek and shoulder and arm.

Vio smiled—his clean, shark-tooth smile—and said, “See?”

Aki smiled back.

“Yeah, I see.”

“Well come over here and give me a hug!” Zoe said in her booming voice, holding her arms up to welcome him.

Vio accepted the invitation and finished his passage through the bar all the way to stand right in front of Zoe so he could wrap his ghostly arms around her. Like Aki, Vio was about a head shorter than Zoe, so when she wrapped her arms around him, she could easily set her chin in his hair, and she used her height to look down and make sure her arms were ringed around the outside of his body without sinking through the border too much.

And then she flicked her head to signal for Aki to come in too, and together they made a sandwich with him in the middle. Aki pushed her head in next to Vio’s while Zoe tilted her cheek down toward the top of his hair. Only Aki and Zoe could feel each other’s bodies, but they could feel the warm hum in Vio’s soul as he settled in comfortably between them.

It hummed a song that conveyed such simple feeling.

//Home. Cozy. Safe. Calm. Peace. Happy.//

A song like a cat’s contented purring as it fell asleep.

Zoe and Aki looked at each other with smiles as that song reverberated against them.

//Yeah, this is our son,// their souls hummed in response.

Cory was back at the counter again, standing next to Ae, and feeling the thoughts that expanded their souls, xir throat began to tighten. Xe looked away as xir locked hands bounced on the counter, but it didn’t help. The vibrations were still there.

Then Ae reached a hand across the counter to lay on top of xir hands, and even better, spread eir soul around xem to ease the agitation. It made it a little easier to feel xir own happiness for Vio's sake.

Zoe took a deep breath and blew it out with the sound like she was close to tearing up. She dabbed at her eyes with the back of her wrist.

"Mm! Mhmm! Well," she said clearing her throat before looking over at Ae and Cory. "I guess we're gonna think about our next moves. What are *you* two up to next?"

Cory swallowed and cleared xir throat as well.

"Mm. Uh, well, I guess I better go talk to the guys before I take off."

"Ah. Yeah," Zoe said with a somber tone.

"Not really sure how to tell them. Zach's not gonna take it well."

"No, I wouldn't think so."

Feeling the collective concern emanating from them all, Ae said, "I'll make sure he's ok."

"Oh good," Aki said. "That'll be good."

"And we'll take care of him after you. Lord knows he needs help," Zoe added.

"Yeah," Cory agreed with a sigh. They had all known that for a long time, of course. Which was why Cory had put off thinking about how this could go down. Xe had always told xemself xe could and would leave the band whenever it stopped being right for xem, but now that xe was on the verge of doing it, xe couldn't keep the image of Zach lying on the floor drowned in alcohol from appearing in xir head. Maybe it would be better to just *not* tell him, to just take off and leave it to Zoe to explain . . .

Maybe.

It was certainly possible.

But Cory also felt like xe owed the band an explanation, face to face. And if Ae was there, they could make *certain* Zach would survive the night.

Xe blew out a breath and checked xir watch again. It wasn't even midnight yet. The guys would still be up.

"All right, guess we'll head over there."

"Kay. Good luck."

"Thanks."

"You're going to say goodbye to us before you really take off though, right?" Aki asked.

"Uh, yeah, sure."

Zoe eyed xem.

"You say that like you weren't planning on it before."

"Well I mean, it's not like we're never gonna see each other again."

"Bitch, you know damn well that's not a good enough reason to not say *goodbye*," Zoe chided teasingly. "What's wrong with you?"

"I *said* I'll do it."

"Uh-huh." Zoe raised an eyebrow at xem, then broke into a grin. "I'm gonna be on your case for the rest of time."

"Don't I fucking know it," Cory said while rubbing xir temples.

"You *like* me." She crossed her arms. "Don't act like you don't."

"We're gonna go now." Cory grabbed Ae's arm and tugged to get em moving. "See you later."

"I'll be waiting for you," Zoe said, still grinning.

"Bye," Aki said, and both she and Vio waved.

Cory saluted to them with two straight fingers before turning all the way around and walking toward the door with Ae at xir side. As they entered the dim hall, Cory could still see clearly in xir mind's eye the image of that trio, that trinity, and thought about how now, xe knew what a family was supposed to feel like.

Xe dedicated a moment to only xir happiness for Vio, because xe knew if xe didn't, it would get lost in the sinking hole of xir soul's bass hum.

## CHAPTER 11

Ae locked the door once the two of them were outside. It didn't seem necessary, but it did seem respectful to put it back the way they had found it. The temperature had dropped a couple degrees since they had arrived, so Cory was looking forward to getting the heater going. The car was so close xe only got a few seconds to look up at the sky before xe was stepping inside and turning the engine on. Ae spilled in through eir door as easily as water through a sieve and sat hugging eir bent legs.

Cory held xir hands up to the vents to feel the air blowing out as xe said, "It's weird." Xe turned xir hands backward and forward to get an even distribution. "This is huge. What they're talking about doing is changing the whole world. I saw what Vio can do. But it still doesn't really *feel* like there's anything different. Yet."

Ae considered xem.

"Does that disappoint you?"

Xe looked at Ae.

"No, it just feels weird. Maybe surprising. I was kind of expecting to feel shaken up and excited."

"Well, you've got other things on your mind. And they're focused on *changing* the world while you're looking forward to getting *out* of it."

Cory looked at xir hands as xe flipped them backward and forward again. The air was getting warmer.

"I think I want to do it now."

"The change?"

"Yeah."

They were alone now, which was how xe wanted it. And maybe if xe got the change done, it would start to sink in—that xir reality was completely different now.

“All right.”

Ae rolled in the seat until eir legs were tucked under em and e was facing Cory. Cory couldn't move like Ae could, so xe just twisted a little in xir seat to look at em. Ae stared, the soft glow from eir white hair reflecting off eir gold eyes and making them shine. Ae's soul hummed around eir body like a thin casing, and it expanded as a whole toward him—not one single tongue as e had done for the others.

Cory felt eir vibrations in xir soul as e wrapped around and entered into xem. Xe knew it would be quick, but xe focused on the sensation, not wanting to miss anything. Ae's vibrations flowed with xirs, and eventually xe felt something new. Ae's substance had always resonated. They were like the sound of two instruments playing together—separate but harmonized. The notes of one instrument couldn't change the notes of the other, they just happened to fit well together.

What xe felt now was different.

Something was changing xir notes.

Just a few out of the whole, but still, it was a noticeable force. And it was vaguely uncomfortable, something akin to the awkwardness a patient felt when a dentist intruded into their mouth.

But Cory welcomed it, and as expected, it lasted only a few seconds. Xe knew instantly when the work was done. Xe could feel the difference.

Xe could feel every cell in xir body, the energy each one produced, the vibrations of each atom, the delicate balance of energy between the electrons and protons, the waves of the subatomic particles within them, moving and interacting in accordance with their nature.

And xe could feel that that nature was xirs to control, if xe so chose. Leaving it alone, all those waves would continue on as they were, but dormant within each of those waves was the potential force of xir will. It had always been there, ready to be exercised at any time, like the neurons spread throughout xir muscles that were activated by electrical pulses from xir brain.

Xe could feel the entire map of the matter comprising xir body, and it was so vivid it no longer felt familiar. Xir body had always felt like a dead weight, holding xem down and dulling xir experience of life. Now, it was bursting with activity, radiating energy xe had never noticed before. Xe held up xir hands and appreciated the intricacy of xir blood vessels and nerve strings and the mobility of xir muscles and joints as xe flexed xir fingers and rotated xir wrists.

All of this had been xem. All of this had been the human named Cory Rhys. These bones and muscles, these cells and molecules, these things had been what made xem.

Not anymore.

Now, it was Cory that made these things. Or unmade them, if xe wanted to.

Xe felt it so vividly now. Humans were like incubators in which souls could never reach full maturity. Human souls could never emerge and separate as independent life. Humans needed their bodies. Humans *were* their bodies—the combination of body and soul.

Cory wasn't human anymore.

Xe didn't need a body. This body didn't define xem or limit xem anymore. Xe could look at it now, every complex detail of it, without feeling caged by it, condemned to a life and death sentence inside it.

Though that wasn't enough to make xem stop hating it, and xe certainly wouldn't miss it once xe dissolved it.

Which xe would do later.

For now, xe spent a few seconds curling and uncurling xir fingers slowly, seeing the electric signals passing along xir nerves, the reshaping of xir muscles to make them move, the flow of blood in the veins and arteries, the death and birth of cells from the skin to the bone. It was almost mesmerizing. When xe breathed, xe could feel the oxygen and carbon dioxide passing in and out of the little pockets in xir lungs, feel it mingle with the red blood cells, feel all the billions and trillions of tiny interactions among the microscopic pieces of this . . . *thing*.

And xe knew xe could change any part of it xe wanted to. Xe didn't have to breathe. He didn't have to have a beating heart. Xe could be nothing but a half-inch layer of skin surrounding empty air or one solid substance—or fucking strawberry jam if xe wanted.

A smile spread across xir face, and a single, breathy laugh bubbled up from xir chest.

“Hhh.”

Xe held xir curled fingers in the air and fixed the paint on xir nails so they were smooth black again. Not an important detail to attend to, but it felt good to do.

Xe laughed again, and then again, before xir throat got a dull ache and xe had to swallow to ease the pain. And then xe pushed xir fingertips against xir closed eyes and breathed in the dark. Xir breathing became irregular, breathing out hard, pausing, and then sucking in a choppy breath. Once, twice, three times.

Xe put xir hands down and looked up at the ceiling, caught between laughing and crying, the sound coming out of xem a combination of both.

“It's done,” xe said with a cracked voice. Xir smile trembled hard and xe shook xir head. “It's finally happened.” When the tears were about to fall xe covered xir face completely with both hands and pressed down. As xir body struggled to suppress and hold still—out of habit, no doubt—xir soul whirled wildly, howling in celebration, overwhelmed with enough joy to light the world with one spark.

Next to xem, Ae smiled and reveled in the beauty of that joy, its rich, symphonic depth and passion. A pleasant tingling sensation arose in em in response, the kind so deliciously addictive it made Ae not care where they were as long as e could experience Cory forever.

They stayed there for just a little while longer, until Cory could rein xemself in enough to focus. Xe put xir hands on the wheel and looked at Ae, who was half-lost in a trance of bliss.

“All right, let’s go.”

“Mm.”

Cory could have crossed the distance in a blink now, just warped from one location to another, but xe actually liked driving. It soothed xem. So xe took the human route along roads and with the occasional stops. Even after midnight, there were still a handful of other cars scattered about, headed to wherever they were going. Cory could have looked into the drivers to find out, but xe didn’t care enough for that.

They arrived at the house and as usual, Cory parked on the street. They couldn’t hear any music playing, but they could see light through the windows. Good. They were up.

Cory was just about to knock, but the front door swung open before xir hand made contact, so instead xe nearly smacked Wyatt in the face.

“*Shit!*” he shouted, jumping back. “Ho *shit!* Cory! The fuck are you doing here?”

“I uh, came to see you guys,” xe said as xir brows knit together, seeing movement over Wyatt’s shoulder.

“Sorry, now’s not a good time,” Wyatt said quickly, looking over his shoulder into the house.

“Something wrong?”

“Yeah. We need to get Zach to the hospital.”

“Oh shit. What happened?”

Gabriel was now right behind Wyatt, holding a limp and unconscious Zach up on his back.

“There is a lot of alcohol in his system,” Ae said.

Wyatt and Cory both looked at em.

“Yeah. He’s been real bad tonight. Drank way too much, so we gotta hurry.”

“No.”

Wyatt blinked at Ae.

“*What?*”

“You don’t need to take him anywhere. I can help.” Ae looked at Cory. “Just like I said I would.”

“The fuck are you talking about?”

“Get inside,” Ae said, gliding past Wyatt into the house.

“Hey! What—?”

“Come on,” Cory said, giving Wyatt an encouraging push with one hand to get him back in.

“Seriously, what the fuck? Are you a doctor or something?” he asked Ae, still not closing the door all the way even after Cory was inside as well.

“Better,” Ae answered, then looking at Gabriel said, “You can put him down.”

Gabriel looked at Ae with bewilderment, the outermost vibrations of his soul mirroring the sentiments in Wyatt’s.

//What the fuck? The fuck are they talking about? Why are they saying this? What do we do?//

Gabriel glanced at Cory, who nodded with firm confidence, then looked at Wyatt, his face asking silently, “What do I do?”

Wyatt went stiff and glanced quickly between Cory and Ae, hesitant and confused, then asked, “You can really help him? *Really?*”

Ae set eir gold eyes steadily toward Wyatt.

“Really.”

Wyatt wavered, not totally convinced, but then looked at Gabriel and made a vague gesture.

“Ok,” he said with a skeptical tone.

“You can put him down,” Ae repeated to Gabriel.

Gabriel gave Wyatt one last look for confirmation, and he shrugged and gestured toward the couch, as if to say, “Let them do their thing,” then shut the door.

So Gabriel hitched Zach up a little higher on his back and walked him back into the living room. Ae and Cory both helped transfer Zach to the couch while Gabriel knelt down. When Zach was off, Gabriel stood up and was joined by Wyatt, who both watched as Cory and Ae centered Zach between them. Ae knelt with both legs on the couch and put both hands on Zach, one on the top of his head and the other on his thigh. E didn’t need to, e just did it for show, so that Wyatt and Gabriel would know it was Ae that caused what happened next.

Because they couldn’t see how Ae dipped eir soul into Zach’s body, found all the molecules of alcohol circulating in his bloodstream and sloshing in his stomach, and unmade them, stilling the fundamental vibrations of their atoms with precision and efficiency. In a few seconds, there wasn’t a drop of alcohol left in him. And for good measure, Ae also targeted his liver and cleaned it up, undoing the damage years of depression drinking had caused.

Cory watched Ae’s work with admiration, while also reading into Zach’s soul to find the night’s story from his point of view.

*Fuck, what if we never go anywhere? What if we never get scouted? What if Cory graduates and moves on, just like James? Fuck. Fuck. What if we make an album and nothing happens? What if this is all we ever are? What if? What if? What if? What if what if what if what if what if fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck shit fuck shit fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck oh holy fuck I want to fucking die fuck fuck fuck fuck*

Nothing in particular had triggered such a surge, it was just the work of his brain chemistry firing off in ways that filled the pool of his mind with dark waters.

Ae also repaired the slight erosion in Zach's throat from his earlier vomiting, and at that point, Zach woke up. Ae removed his hands as he cleared his throat, blinked rapidly, then looked around. His brow furrowed at the sight of Cory and Ae at his sides.

"When did you two get here? What time is it?"

While he was looking around, Wyatt and Gabriel both opened their mouths. Then their voices overlapped as Wyatt gasped, "Holy *shit*, what the fuck did you *do*?" and Gabriel said something in Yiddish while rushing forward.

"Zach, you ok?" he asked, crouching so he could face Zach eye to eye.

"Yeah," he answered, sounding surprised. "I feel pretty good, actually."

Wyatt came close too and looked closely at Zach's face.

"Holy fuck, your eyes aren't even bloodshot. Ok *seriously*," he said, looking at Ae, "*what the fuck? What the fuck did you do and how the fuck did you do it?*"

Ae shrugged casually.

"I made what I wanted to happen happen."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means what it means. I wanted things to happen, so I made them happen."

"How the f—"

“I’m not human,” Ae interrupted bluntly. “I can do *lots* of things humans can’t do.”

All three looked at Ae like e was speaking nonsense. But Wyatt and Gabriel couldn’t help but have a hue of uncertainty in their skepticism. When Zach looked like he was about to say something, Ae cut him off too.

“I’m not the one who wanted to talk to you,” e said, holding up a finger close to Zach’s opening mouth. “We came here because *Cory* has something to say.”

Ae looked across Zach to Cory to transfer the spotlight to xem. Cory licked xir lips in preparation to speak, but then Wyatt broke in.

“Whoa, whoa. Wait. That’s it? That’s all your gonna tell us? Ae, what the fuck? You can’t just say something—you can’t just *do* something like that and not fucking *explain!*”

“Why not?”

“*Because!* This isn’t *normal.*”

“I know,” Ae said, with a tone suggesting e didn’t understand what that had to do with anything.

“Then,” Wyatt said, flustered, looking to Gabriel and Zach for support. He gestured sharply with both hands and insisted, “*Tell us!*”

Ae looked at Cory again. Cory made a vague gesture.

//Do what you want.//

In this situation, Ae didn’t have strong enough feelings that could be called “want”. But e made a decision, since that was how they were going to move on. Words would take too long, so Ae opted for the easier way. With one tongue for each of them, Ae inserted into their minds the memories Ae had of finding the bubble of existence that contained their known universe, exploring it, finding Earth, adopting eir human form, and finally, undoing Zach’s binge, showing them the method and process e used.

When Ae was done and retracted eir tongues, Wyatt, Gabriel, and Zach all pressed on their foreheads and breathed hard for a moment. Then they looked at Ae, then Cory, then each other, then Ae again. They were lost for words, except the whispers of “Fuck” that occasionally slipped out.

“I came to tell you,” Cory said, taking advantage of their stunned silence to speak, “Ae and I are leaving. So, I won’t be around to play with you guys anymore.” Xe clenched xir teeth, making xir ears move, and then in a low, sincere voice, xe said, “I’m sorry.”

Zach’s expression changed from bewilderment to horror.

“You’re leaving?”

Cory nodded.

“Yeah. But I didn’t want to just disappear on you. I thought I should let you know upfront.”

Zach seemed to immediately forget about Ae and dropped his head into his hands.

“*Fuck*,” he hissed with a depth and force of agony. “I fucking knew it.”

“When are you leaving?” Gabriel asked.

“Tonight I think.” Cory paused and glanced at Ae, then nodded to xemself. “Yeah, tonight.”

“Where are you going?”

“Out there,” Cory answered with a vague gesture toward the ceiling. “Where Ae’s from.”

Neither Wyatt nor Gabriel seemed to have a response to that, while Zach was still curled over himself, cursing.

“But look, you should know something. Zoe and Aki . . . they can do what Ae can do. What Ae did to Zach? They’re gonna do that to the whole world. That’s like, their mission. They’re gonna fix everything that’s fucked up around here. So you’ll be ok. Zach, *listen*.”

Cory put a hand on the back of Zach's shoulder and shook him.

"I know things suck and you're depressed as fuck, but I'm telling you, things are gonna be so much better. Zoe and Aki are gonna make sure life is better for you. For everyone. You gotta trust them. Ok? You hearing me?"

"Wait, when did they start being able to do something like that?" Wyatt asked.

"Don't worry about it," Cory said evasively, not wanting to get too deep into those details. "They just can. They can fix anything. You can have a better house and better cars and better jobs and better lives. Just because I'm leaving doesn't mean your life is over and there's no hope anymore. Zoe and Aki are gonna do more for you than I ever could."

"Fuck man," Zach groaned, wiping his face as he looked up. "We were gonna be *big*. I swear, I really believed that you were gonna get us places. We were gonna go platinum and sell out concerts all over the world. We were gonna be fuckin' *rich* and it was gonna be amazing."

"Look, I don't know if that was ever gonna happen. Maybe." Cory didn't bother saying that none of that interested xem, and that xe probably wouldn't have been able to go through with it if they had started to go big. That didn't matter anymore. "But this is *better*. This isn't just about you and the band, this is about everybody. Literally *everybody*. Even if the band gets famous and everything, that still leaves a fuck ton of people still living shitty lives. I know you've been hoping for it to happen because it's realistic, but I'm all for going with something that you'd think was impossible. One hundred percent."

Of course xe was. Obviously.

Things went quiet after that—for a while.

Until Gabriel finally blew out a breath.

"I don't even know what to say."

Wyatt agreed, "Yeah," while tussling his hair to give his hand something to do.

“Well *mostly* I just want to know that Zach’s not gonna be killing himself,” Cory said with a pointed look toward Zach. “We told Zoe we’d make sure you didn’t. She *specifically* wants to make sure you guys are ok. You hear me?” xe asked Zach directly. “Zoe’s gonna take care of you guys. You’re all gonna be ok. I *swear*.”

Gabriel shook his head.

“I still don’t get why she can do . . . Why she’d have that kind of power.”

“She *does*,” was all Cory gave as an explanation. “She and Aki. So just make sure you see what all they do. All right? *Tell* me you’ll just get through tonight without any more . . .” Xe made another oblique look toward Zach and finished, “. . . *incidents*.”

“Yeah. Sure, yeah,” Wyatt said, still slightly dazed. “It’s not like *we* want a repeat.”

“Hell no,” Gabriel agreed.

“I don’t get how this is happening,” Zach groaned, and he started massaging his face and temples. “This is too much for me to take in right now.”

“You’ll have *plenty* of time to understand,” Cory promised.

“Well tell me something,” Wyatt said. “If Zoe and Aki are gonna make things so great, why are you leaving?”

Cory raked xir fingers through xir hair and sighed.

“Because . . . Because I just want to get away from everything. I want to get away from *people*. I need to . . . I dunno.”

Xe wanted time and space to relax, to feel who xe was without all the external influences shaping xem. Xe wanted to be alone with Ae so xe could find peace and feel joy and not have to think about anything else. Xe felt like xe needed to detox before xe could really appreciate any improvements that were to come. Xe didn’t think xe could go from hating the world to liking it

without a period in between to let xir soul rest a bit from all the energy that hatred created in xem.

“I just want to.”

Wyatt exhaled and crossed his arms.

“All right. Fine. So are we never gonna see you again? Are you ever coming back?”

“I’m sure we’ll come back at some point. I just don’t know when.”

“So should we treat this like it’s the last time we’ll ever see you? Just in case?”

“I mean . . . If you want to,” Cory said awkwardly.

“Well it can’t *hurt*, right?”

“I . . . guess not.”

“So come here.”

Wyatt held out an arm to Cory. Xe hesitated but slowly moved closer until Wyatt could hook his arm around xem and pull xem in. Wyatt hugged xem with one arm and pounded on xir back a few times with the other fist.

“You take care,” he said.

“Thanks,” Cory said, not sure whether xe wanted to hug Wyatt back. “You too.”

Wyatt released xem, and then Gabriel was right there to do the same.

“It’s been cool having you around,” he said while giving Cory a brotherly slap on the shoulder.

“Yeah,” Cory said, xir voice shrunk a little from the attention. “And you guys have been great. Thanks for . . . everything, I guess. Really. Making music with you guys was . . . Well, it’s the best thing I’ve ever done with anyone. So, thanks for having me.”

“You were great to work with.”

“Yeah,” Wyatt agreed.

Cory had to swallow before he turned to Zach, who finally pushed himself off the couch with a reluctant sigh. Cory could see in Zach's face and soul that he didn't want this to happen.

"You're really leaving," he said with a heavy voice.

"Yeah," Cory sighed.

Zach heaved out a long breath.

"Damn. I don't know what we're gonna do without you. We're never gonna have a vocalist that can measure up to you."

Cory didn't know whether that was a compliment he was supposed to say thanks to or a statement that was meant to induce guilt.

"I always thought *you* sounded pretty good," he said instead.

"Tch, right," Zach snorted.

"Well if *you* don't want to be lead, maybe you can just be instrumental for a while. I mean, you sound great either way."

"Probably won't have any choice."

"But you'll keep playing though, right?" Cory asked, suddenly concerned. "You're not gonna quit without a singer, are you?"

"You worried about us?" Wyatt asked with a smile.

"Duh. You guys make the best music I've ever heard. That's why I fucking *joined*. It would suck for you to stop. And you've got lots of fans now, I bet you'll be able to find a replacement soon."

"Won't be the same though."

"You'll still be the best though. Literally my favorite band."

"Well now you're just gonna make us blush," Gabriel teased.

“Shut up.” Cory pushed him on his chest, but just a little, not hard enough to make him lose his balance.

“What?” he laughed. “It feels good hearing you say that.”

“Whatever.” Cory was starting to get jittery, so he looked at Ae, who was still sitting on his legs on the couch. “You ready?”

“Sure.”

Ae rose effortlessly, looking less like a body exercising its muscles and more like a puppet being lifted by an invisible force.

“So, this is it.” Wyatt lifted his hands then let them drop against his sides with a soft slap.

“Yeah.”

“All right. Well . . .”

There was a pause as all of them rejected salutations in their minds. And then Zach held out his hand to Cory.

“Take care.”

Cory looked at the hand, then reached out with his own to grasp it.

“You too.”

They squeezed, and then Zach turned to Ae.

“And thanks to you too. For helping me out tonight.”

Ae accepted his hand, which was more uncertain than it had been with Cory, and gave it one shake.

“No problem at all,” Ae said congenially. “I like your music too. I’d hate for it to end too soon.”

“Thanks.”

They let go, and then Cory lifted a hand in lieu of saying goodbye and headed toward the door. Xe opened it xemself and xe and Ae walked out into the nippy, dry air. Cory looked over xir shoulder to see the three at the door, and xe made one last wave to them—and they all waved back—before turning away for good.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

No way to know for sure.

Xe and Ae got in the car and waited for the air to get a little warmer before Ae asked, “Where to now?”

“Now,” Cory said as xe turned on the headlights, “I need to make one more trip home.”

\*

Once Cory was inside the winding lanes of xir spacious neighborhood, the car was the only sound for several miles. Xir ears rang with the quiet after xe had pulled into xir spot and turned the engine off. Cory then tried out xir new ability and passed through the car door without opening it, making all the waves of xir atoms pass smoothly between those of the car.

Easy. Just as Ae had always made it look.

Xe and Ae entered the house the same way, pushing right through the door with no resistance to slow them down. From there, they weren’t headed upstairs. Cory didn’t need to collect anything from xir room. Xe didn’t need anything xe owned where they were going. Actually, xe didn’t need any of it anymore, at all. And xe had never been sentimentally attached to any particular thing—not even the recordings xe had made of xir music, since xe carried all those songs in xir soul—so it was going to be very easy to leave xir stuff behind.

Instead, they stayed on the first floor and went to xir parents’ room. Xe couldn’t remember the last time xe had ventured in that direction, it almost felt like an ominous realm,

one that xe had come to naturally avoid. But tonight xe went straight to it. Xe and Ae arrived at the closed door, and for a moment Cory just stared at it, wondering what to do, how to announce xir presence.

And what the fuck xe was going to say.

Xe wasn't ready to say anything, not really. But xe wanted to say something before xe left. Xe hoped that xe would figure it out as xe went. Xe just had to start.

Xe took in a deep breath—a human habit, one that felt right, appropriate, the natural thing to do before taking action—and then knocked. Loud. Three whole times.

Xe heard movement through the door and the sound of hitched breath as both xir parents jolted awake in bed.

“The hell?” Carolyn mumbled.

Cory knocked again, not as hard this time.

“Mom. Dad. It's me.”

Xe heard Carolyn groan.

“What?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“*Now?*”

“Yeah. Now.”

Carolyn groaned as if she was in pain then hiseds, “Fucking *Christ.*”

“Come in,” Christopher offered groggily.

So Cory put xir hand on the doorknob, but then paused to look at Ae.

//Stay here for now. I'm gonna try to do this by myself.//

Ae nodded and took one step to the side. Cory opened the door, just as Christopher was turning on the lamp on his nightstand, and went in.

“What’s going on?” Christopher asked while rubbing his eyes. He blinked hard a few times to get his eyes focused, then looked up at Cory. Next to him, Carolyn was forcing herself up into a sitting position and looked to be in half a mind to stab someone, but she just sat there with a silently grumpy face, looking toward Cory with heavy-lidded eyes.

“I uh . . .” Cory began, then faltered, still waiting for the inspiration to kick in. “Um.”

Xe resented that it was so difficult to talk to them, because that meant . . .

It was easy to talk to people xe didn’t care about, people whose opinions xe didn’t care about. Xe didn’t have to filter anything. Xe didn’t have to put effort into crafting xir words in a way that wouldn’t hurt or push away.

So if xe was struggling to begin speaking, even to express anger toward them . . .

Xe suppressed a grimace from rising on xir face.

“I’ve got a lot on my mind, and, I don’t really know where to start. Um.”

Xe scratched the back of xir head.

Xe blew out a loud breath.

“Look,” xe said, going in nearly blind. Xe could only see ahead to the next few words xe planned to let out of xir mouth. “I think it’s cool you two started going to therapy. Really. And I hope it helps. I hope you get what you want out of it.”

During xir pause, Christopher and Carolyn both looked at him with surprise.

“Thanks,” Christopher said tentatively. It looked like he was about to say something else, but Cory cut in. Xe wasn’t at the point yet where this had stopped being a monologue.

“I know why you started going,” xe said. “You want to be happy with each other again. And.” Xe tried not to crack when he said, “You want to see if *we* can have a real relationship, starting now. Or whenever you got around to telling me about it.”

Xir parents had faces as if their fifteen-year-old daughter had just announced she was pregnant.

//How does he *know* that?// xe could feel them both wonder.

And again, before they could ask xem out loud, xe continued, “And I’ve been asking myself the same thing: *Can* we? Is it too late? And honestly?”

Xe shrugged and held out xir hands.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know. And you know.” Xe clenched a fist. “Part of me really hates that you’re even trying.”

At this point, xe could feel xir voice get deeper and thicker.

“Because I’m already used to things the way they are. I hate it that way, but I’m *used* to it. But now you do *this*, and now I’ve got all this *new* shit to think about and it’s really *fucking* with me. If you could have just never cared about me *ever*, then I could have just tried to move on and deal with it myself. But you had to go and decide you actually want to have something to do with me and acknowledge that you fucked up and so now *I* have to decide what *I* want to do about it and I don’t fucking *know*!”

Xe threw xir arms down sharply and growled.

“I don’t fucking *know*! Part of me wants to say *fuck* you! No! It *is* too late! It’s *way* too late! What the fuck is *wrong* with you? What do I need you for at this point anyway? I want to make you feel like shit! I want to hurt you because you hurt me first! I fucking . . .”

Xe clenched xir teeth and shook xir head.

“I want to abandon you now that you want me to get back at you for abandoning *me* when I wanted *you*.”

Xir nose was beginning to sting and xir lips began to curl and tremble. Natural physics was directing the movement of xir body because xe wasn’t actively controlling it xemself. Tears

were on the cusp of rising in xir eyes and xir muscles were tensing and making it harder to breathe. Xe pushed through it like a human rather than bypassing it with xir new freedom. It felt better that way. More satisfying. Xe sucked in a breath through xir tightening throat.

“But at the same time—and it *kills* me, it fucking *kills* me admitting this . . .”

Xe shook xir head again with an angrily scrunched nose.

“Another part of me wants to try. And I hate that. I hate that any part of me could still *want* you. I hate that after all this time, after everything you’ve done and everything you *haven’t* done, some part of me could still want anything to do with you. I fucking hate it! It’s not fucking *fair* that you can do this to me! I should be able to just say fuck you and move on. I shouldn’t be attached to you at all. I don’t get it. I fucking don’t get it at *all!*”

Xe held xir hands up by xir head, fingers curled and nails ready to dig deep into xir scalp. Xe heaved in a breath so heavy it made xir whole torso expand.

“But it’s *there*,” xe growled. “*Fuck*. There’s this part of me that actually wants us to *try* and wants it to work out. It’s *crazy!* How the *fuck* could we *possibly*—could it *possibly* work out? Do you even *really* want to know about me? Do you seriously think we have anything in common? Do you think we could actually ever feel *good* together? When I think about it, it makes no fucking sense! *Aaugh* I wish I could turn this *off!*”

Xe stabbed xir nails into xir forehead and growled from deep in xir throat.

“I don’t want to feel like this.”

Xe didn’t want to want them. But the part of xem that did want them was too happy, like a naïve child, at the possibility and opportunity to finally have their parental attention, that xe couldn’t bring xemself to amputate it.

As xe sucked in a deep breath through xir nose, xir head bent back and eyes blinking rapidly at the ceiling, Christopher slipped out of the bed.

“Cory—”

“I need to go,” xe interrupted. Xe lowered xir head again and saw that Carolyn was looking at Christopher and about to get out of bed too. They both froze and looked at xem.

“I can’t decide what I want. Not yet,” xe explained. “I’m not ready, and I’m too much of a mess right now to think it through. Every time I even try to think about it, it’s nothing but chaos up here.” Xe pointed at xir temple. “I need some time to work on myself before I can know what I really want from you. So I’m gonna go,” xe repeated, as steadily and decisively as xe could. “I’m gonna clear my head, maybe find some real peace and happiness. And maybe if I’m gone, you two can do the same. You can focus on figuring yourselves out without me as a distraction. And then . . . I don’t know. Who knows. Maybe we can try again.”

Xe shrugged.

“Or maybe we’ll see how much better off we are without each other and leave it at that.”

“Cory, wait,” Christopher said quickly as he rushed up to xem. “Where are you going to go?”

Carolyn finally got out of bed too and came to join the two of them.

“Just somewhere that’ll be good for me.”

“How *long*?”

“As long as I need.”

“What are you going to do?”

Xe assumed Christopher meant regarding money, so xe said, “Don’t worry, I’m not asking you to fund my soul-searching or anything. I’ll take care of myself.”

“That’s not why I’m asking. I told you we’ve got money saved for you. That’s not the point. What are you going to be *doing*? Are you traveling with your band? Are you going on a road trip? Are you going backpacking across Europe? Are you joining a monastery?”

Cory almost resented that xe felt a tickle of a laugh when xe wanted to be serious.

“No, I’m not doing any of that. All I know is I’m going to wander around with Ae. But I don’t know exactly where we’re going or what we’ll do.”

“You’re going with Ae?”

“Yeah. Ae’s the one I need right now.”

Christopher looked at a loss. And it made Cory tingle, feeling the sincere concern he felt for xem. Christopher was worried that he would never see Cory again, that he would have to live a life without working out his redemption, that Cory would fizzle out in life and it would be all his fault. And he worried that something might happen to Cory while xe was gone. He wanted to stop xem from going, but xe felt unqualified to say xe shouldn’t or couldn’t go.

And Cory felt it: Christopher would actually think about xem and worry about xem every day after xe left.

Cory didn’t know how to name the emotion that made xem feel.

Whatever it was, it made xem pause, finally giving Christopher a chance to speak.

“I’m sorry,” he said, voice weighed down by guilt. “I know that’s not enough to make up for anything. I just . . . wanted to tell you. I want you to know that I am—sorry. Really. And if, at some point, you want to come back and give us a second chance, I promise I’ll be better. But if you don’t, I understand. I don’t blame you if you hate us and can’t forgive us. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

Cory meant it. Xe knew Christopher was being sincere, and xe could appreciate that, on some level. Enough that xe didn’t automatically round on him in a rage.

“I don’t think I’m ready to forgive yet. But, thanks.”

Xe wasn’t ready to forgive, and yet, xe thought to xemself, everything that had happened had led xem to this moment, which was, in fact, exactly what xe wanted. Xe wouldn’t call it fate,

xe knew better than that. Xe had just gotten lucky. Not everyone got compensation for the shit in their lives, and certainly not as good as xirs.

“I know,” Christopher said softly.

“Hang on,” Carolyn said, nudging Christopher. “He’s only seventeen. Are we even *allowed* to let him go off on his own like this?”

“Just tell people I ran away,” Cory said. “It’s basically the truth. So just file a missing persons report or something to get you off the hook. I mean, I could have just left without telling you anything, and it wouldn’t have been your fault if I did, right?”

Carolyn didn’t look too satisfied, but like Christopher, Cory could sense that she didn’t feel like she had much right to interfere with xir plans. They had spent xir whole life allowing xem to be independent, how could they just suddenly stop now?

“Maybe,” she conceded. Then she sighed and reached out a hand to cup xir cheek, the teal of their day out still coating her nails. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yeah. Definitely.”

She rubbed her thumb softly over xir cheek while looking into xir eyes.

“I wish you could have had a better mom,” she sighed. “Whether me or someone else. I wish you could have had someone who knew what the fuck they were doing.”

Cory swallowed and sniffled and blinked.

“Yeah,” xe said, xir voice deeper than xe expected. “Thanks.”

She pushed her bottom lip up with emotion and tilted her head, then she sighed through her nose and crossed her arms.

“So when are you taking off?” she asked.

“Right now. I’m not taking anything with me. You can do whatever you want with my stuff, I don’t really need it.”

“We’ll leave everything where it is,” Christopher assured xem quickly.

//Just in case,// he thought. //In case you want to come back, or realize you want anything later on.//

“All right.”

Cory didn’t really care. If that was what he wanted, xe wasn’t going to try to convince him otherwise.

“If you ever want to get in touch,” Christopher added, sounding just a little bit desperate, “feel free. Any time.”

That was a silly thing to say, Cory thought, but xe didn’t point it out. The two of them had such busy lives, even if Cory wanted to call, they wouldn’t have time for xem. But, xe supposed it was nice that he seemed to mean it in this moment.

“Sure. Thanks.”

An awkward pause crept in among them as they all wondered what the next move should be. Cory worked xir jaw a little, then mumbled, “All right, well, I guess I’ll . . .” Xe swung a thumb toward their door.

“Wait,” Carolyn said, and then she had Cory caught in a full body hug and squeezed xem hard. “Thanks for telling us.”

For a few seconds, Cory held xir arms up without curling them around her. Then xe relented to the moment and hugged her back—a little, anyway.

“I wanted to,” xe said.

Carolyn let xem go and cupped xir face with both hands for one last emotional look into xir eyes, rubbing xir cheeks with both thumbs.

“Be careful out there, ok?”

“I will.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

Carolyn crossed her arms again, giving Christopher a chance to step in. He looked at Cory eye to eye, awkwardness vibrating out from him as he tentatively reached out to give Cory a hug too. It was a disorienting experience. Cory didn't have any clear memories of xir dad being physical like this with xem, and it was too unfamiliar to decide if xe liked it or not.

Maybe when—if—xe came back, xe would be able to tell.

“Is there anything you need before you go?”

As Christopher let go, Cory said, “No, I'm good. Thanks though.”

Christopher nodded somberly and gave Cory one pat on the shoulder.

“Then . . . I guess . . .”

Cory shifted xir weight from one foot to another a few times, then said, “See you.”

//I hope so,// Christopher's soul vibrated as he nodded and repeated back, “Yeah. See you.”

“Bye Cory. Take care.”

“You too.”

Cory was anxious to get going, but weirdly against just rushing out. Xe started turning, paused, started to turn then paused again to throw up a hand in a casual wave, then felt incredibly awkward as xe finished the turn and headed for the door. Xe heard Carolyn call out one more soft “Goodbye” before xe reached it. At the frame, xe looked back halfway, gave one more wave against xir better judgment, and closed the door as they were waving back.

Once they were out of sight, xe exhaled hard and then began speed-walking away. Ae was right beside xem, floating along just an inch above the floor, and eventually Cory finally remembered xe didn't have to be walking like this. And since xe didn't want to risk that xir

parents might burst out of the room to stop xem or prolong the goodbye, xe warped xemself into pure soul waves and darted out of the house in less than a snap.

Ae kept up, and they landed right by Cory's car. Thinking it would make things easier, xe exerted xir will onto the car and undid it, stilling all the vibrations of its atoms to nothing so that the whole thing disappeared. Now xir parents could report that xe had left in xir car in the middle of the night to only god-knew-where, and no one would ever find it.

With that taken care of, Cory looked at Ae. Ae looked back. It was almost time.

\*

"So you got everything in order?" Zoe asked when the two of them returned to Mike's, where Zoe, Aki, and Vio were still gathered, Zoe and Aki sitting on stools at the bar while Vio sat cross-legged on top of it. It had occurred to Cory before they came that Zoe hadn't actually told xem where they would be before xe and Ae left, so xe was glad they hadn't gone anywhere.

"Yeah. And Zach should be good for the night, so."

"Don't worry. I've already got an eye on him. So to speak," Zoe said.

"Yeah?"

"M-hm," Zoe nodded, wearing a proud smirk. "I've got a piece of me hanging out over there, watching."

Cory was about to say that was miles from here, but then xe remembered reason: distances didn't matter. Zoe could have her soul stretched out in millions of threads combing the world and it wouldn't cause a sweat.

"Guess you've got it all figured out then," xe noted.

"Oh yeah. Ae's right, it's pretty easy once you know what you're doing. Intuitive even."

True enough. But it seemed she had a better imagination for what to do with it than Cory. Which was fine. Xe nodded in agreement.

“Right. So what are *you* up to?”

“Brainstorming,” Aki said. “Getting our thoughts together. And I think we’ve got a pretty good idea of how we’re gonna start.”

“No spoilers though,” Zoe said quickly. “I want you to be a clean slate when you see what we’ve done.”

“All right,” Cory answered with an amused smirk. “And I promise I won’t peak before we’re back.”

“Good.” Zoe knocked on the counter a few times then took in a breath through her nose. “So. Time for you to take off?”

Cory nodded. “Yeah.”

“All right. Well.”

Zoe and Aki got up from their stools. Zoe reached Cory first and gave xem a big hug. As xe was being squished, Cory thought that this was absolutely the most physical contact xe had ever had in one day.

“Have a good trip,” she said grinning.

“Thanks. You have fun here.”

“You bet we will. We’ve got *plans*,” she said, her grin turning mischievous.

“You’ll see when you come back,” Aki said, then held out her arms, calling for Cory to come to her. And xe did, because at this point, why not. The greater height difference made hugging her different from everyone else—hugging down was a little more awkward physically, but it wasn’t so bad.

Then while the two of them said their goodbyes to Ae, Cory looked past them.

“See you later, Vio.”

He nodded.

“Yeah.”

“Uh, hope things go well for you here.”

“I think they will,” Vio said with a confident smile, and Cory could see that his teeth were still zig-zag sharp. “Oh, and I hope you like it out there.”

“Thanks. I’m sure I will.”

Then Vio came closer, but it wasn’t to see xem. Cory wasn’t surprised that Vio wasn’t compelled to hug xem, and xe wasn’t bothered by it either. Xe was past xir hug quota, even for a special occasion, and even if the next one would be from a ghost.

“Bye Ae,” he said.

“Bye Vio,” Ae said back, giving him a smile.

Then Vio opened his arms, and Ae opened eirs in response. They came together, Ae visible through Vio’s transparent arms and finger bones, and hugged for more seconds than the Vio before tonight could have handled in a year.

Vio let go and smiled.

“See you when you come back.”

“I’ll be happy to see you again.”

Vio stepped back closer to Aki and Zoe, leaving Cory and Ae side by side, two parties facing each other in an empty room that sang with memories of so many nights of energy and fun and life.

“Ok,” Cory said before exhaling a long breath. “We’re outta here.”

“You’ll be back,” Zoe said with a smirk.

“And I expect to be impressed,” xe bantered back.

“Oh you *will* be. Now go on so we can get started.” She shooed xem off with a few sweeping motions of her hand.

“We’re going,” xe assured. Then xe reached out and took Ae’s closest hand in xirs. They looked at each other as they squeezed each other’s hands, feeling the excitement vibrate through them both in an energizing verse of soulsong.

Cory looked to the three. Inhaled, shoulders rising. Exhaled, shoulders falling.

“Bye.”

“Bye,” Zoe and Aki chimed back.

And to their eyes, it looked like Cory and Ae disappeared in the suction of a blackhole pulling them out of the world at the speed of light.

“Whoa,” Zoe said, brows high on her forehead. “That was fast.”

“Yeah,” Aki agreed.

Vio just grinned and giggled excitedly to himself.

Zoe took a deep breath and cracked all her knuckles.

“Well,” she said and put her hands on her hips. “We about ready?”

## EPILOGUE

Cory and Ae manifested on Earth in the forms they were accustomed to. They knew they were in the right location, but from what they saw, it was hard to tell. It seemed like they had entered a society at least a hundred years after their exit point, like something from a science fiction movie. Not the cyber-dystopias of *Blade Runner* or *Terminator*, though. The place was too bright for that. And . . . *green*.

Everything manmade was sleek and shiny and clean, but there also were trees everywhere, gardens and solar cells on top of every roof and in every balcony, even some kind of foliage clinging to the outside of the new glassy skyscrapers that clustered deeper in the distance toward the center of the city.

Cory spun around slowly to take it all in: the pristine roads, the nearly silent cars that didn't seem to release any exhaust, the bullet trains running along the high-rise tracks, the buildings that weren't brick or wood or concrete anymore but metallic and at least half-made of windows.

//How long have we been gone?// xe asked Ae without speaking.

//I don't know.//

Xe wondered if so much time had passed since they left that xir parents and the band were long dead by now.

They wandered down the street for a while, passing parks and public food gardens that hadn't been there before, and seeing so many people out that Cory had to assume it was a weekend. There were musicians performing in the open, people of all ages playing games and sports in open fields, other people talking to thin devices that showed another person's face. More squirrels ran around in plain sight than Cory had ever seen, while in contrast xe didn't see a single public trashcan anywhere—and yet somehow there was no trash.

Ae mostly noticed that now, no one gave em a strange look or made a startled jump upon seeing em. And no one stared when e wasn't looking. It was disappointing really. Ae had always liked the vibrations of confusion and surprise e caused. At the same time, though, there was a lot more variety in the way humans dressed, with many more clothes looking specially tailored to each individual and hair styled into more creative designs and colors. Ae looked like e fit in among them.

Cory didn't recognize the direction of the streets anymore as they walked, and xe could only assume that meant they had changed layout when they had changed substance—they didn't seem to be asphalt anymore—since it couldn't be xir memory that was wrong. But xe figured if they got lost, they could easily find where they meant to go, in their own way.

They wandered on for a while longer, passing more people and their dogs, their devices, their friends or families, engaged in various activities, some of which Cory recognized and some of which xe didn't. And then finally they came across what they were looking for.

The parking lot was cleaner, smoother, and reorganized to be easier to navigate, and the building itself looked renovated to fit into the rest of the modernized environment—with a garden roof and clean white walls, though still no windows—but it was still Mike's. The words "Crooked Lines" were set in dark green block letters over the front door, a step up from the old sign that had had a few lights out when it turned on.

The lot was empty, but Cory and Ae could feel familiar vibrations inside, so they stayed their path. When they reached the door, it swung open, and there was Zoe, still wearing her punk denim vest and heavy combat boots. Her tightly curled hair was still cut close to her head, but now it had streaks of neon colors that made the designs shaved into the sides stand out even more.

“Well look who it is!” she boomed before stepped out and grabbing Cory to lift xem off xir feet in a hug. “I didn’t expect you guys back so soon!”

She put Cory down and threw eir arms around Ae for a lighter, shorter hug.

“Soon?” Cory repeated, glad xe didn’t need to feel xir body anymore. If xe had given it bones and muscles, they would definitely be sore. “How long has it been?”

“A couple years. Let’s see.” She paused to think. “. . . June, July, August . . .” she murmured to herself, then said, “Six years and seven months.”

“Seriously? Fucking shit, I thought we’d been gone for like a hundred and fifty.”

Zoe grinned.

“Pretty different around here, isn’t it.”

“It’s crazy. It doesn’t look anything like it did before.”

“Heehee,” she laughed mischievously. “So would you say you’re *impressed*?”

“I’m definitely *shocked*. Maybe once you start explaining what everything is, I’ll be impressed.”

“You are so fucking difficult. Honestly.” She grabbed Cory’s jacket lapel and dragged xem in. “*Come on.*”

Ae followed, and the white door locked automatically when it closed behind em. Cory was surprised to see that, unlike the outside, the interior didn’t look much different. The layout was basically the same, the stage off to the right, the bar to the left, a hallway between leading to the bathrooms in the back, and a wide-open seating area. The floor was still roughed-up wood, the walls still brick, the lights still dim, and chairs and tables still with a worn-from-loving-use character, the pictures and posters still mounted on display, the bottles still lined up on shelves behind the counter. It was refreshingly familiar.

“This place still looks the same,” xe noted.

“Yeah,” Zoe said as she led them to the bar where Aki and Vio were sitting on stools.  
“This is just the vibe the place has to have. It wouldn’t be the same if the inside changed.”

“I get that.”

“Cory! Ae!” Aki called, jumping up and racing through the tables to reach them. She smashed into Cory first, giving xem as big as hug as she could, and then turned to Ae to do the same.

“Hey Aki,” xe greeted back. “So . . . you two still seem pretty . . . human.”

Zoe laughed.

“Well yeah,” she said with hands on hips. “We always liked the way we were.”

Cory muttered, “Right.” Because xe remembered that about them, but it still baffled xem. Xe couldn’t imagine being satisfied enough by xir original form to barely change it like that. Besides Zoe’s hair, xe couldn’t make out any significant difference to their appearance or biology. The waves of their bodies’ atoms were the same as when xe had left.

“Come on, have a seat.” She directed them to follow her all the way to the bar.

“Hey Vio,” Cory greeted with a wave.

“Hey Cory. Hi Ae.”

Vio on the other hand, he was obviously playing around with his body’s composition. His current bone structure and organ systems weren’t human, and Cory didn’t know if they were based off an animal or if Vio had designed it all himself. Either way, he had long, bony legs and arms, a torso pinched to half the size of his head, and spikes poking out of each vertebra in his long neck.

“You’re looking good,” Cory said.

Vio smiled. His teeth weren’t as dramatic as when Cory had last seen them, but there were a lot of them, and they were all sharper than human teeth.

“I come up with new designs all the time.”

“It’s true,” Aki confirmed. “He does. Constantly.”

“And . . . does anyone else notice?” xe asked, trying to be delicate.

“Oh he doesn’t show anyone but us,” Zoe said casually.

“Ah.”

“Sit down, sit,” Zoe insisted, pulling over two chairs from a nearby table so they could all sit facing each other.

“Thanks.”

Cory sat with the chair backwards so xe could lean forward on the back, and Ae perched on the seat with legs bent up and heels set on the edge.

“So looks like you’ve been busy out there,” Cory said to get things started.

“Yep,” Zoe agreed. “At first anyway. Things are running pretty smoothly now, so it’s more like we’re just keeping an eye on things at this point. Now we mostly get to enjoy the fruits of our labor.”

“So, you took care of everything? Everywhere?”

“Oh yeah. We’ve been all over the world.” She started listing in a sing-song voice, “And so now there’s no more *pollution*, no more weapons of mass *destruction*, everything runs on renewable *energy*, everything’s made to be either *degradable* or *recyclable*, the prison system’s been completely *restructured*, lots of jobs are *automated* and now there’s just a standard fifteen-hour *work week*. Lots of cool stuff. It’s great. Oh and you’ll love this!” she said with an excited clap. “There’s no gender binary anymore. You’ve got men and women still, but they’re not a default anymore, and there are loads of other possibilities. People don’t get assigned genders when they’re born based off their sex anymore. People choose their gender whenever they feel

like they have one. And some people *never* have one, and some people change their gender over time. It's not a big deal at all."

Cory still didn't understand why gender would still exist, but this was their world now, and *xe* wasn't going to tell them how *xe* thought they should run it. If such a thing as gender made sense to them, then they could keep it.

"That sounds a lot better," *xe* could say sincerely, at least. "But I have to ask. How the *fuck* did you make all this *work*? I mean, this is all the same people that were here when we left, right? How the fuck is everything running so smooth already? How are people already on board with that way of doing gender—and everything else?"

"Oh that. It's fantastic," Zoe answered, grinning and rubbing her hands together. "We just made a few slight *adjustments* to the way people think. It's like *Ae* said, we can exert our will on any kind of wave out there. So we tested it out on a few people first, and it turns out, you can take a person's soul and just"—she held out a hand, and while squinting, mimed the motion of slowly turning a dial just a *little tiny bit*—"tweak a few things. Nothing major, but at the same time just, you know, the foundation for a functioning society."

"Whoa whoa whoa." Cory held up both hands in a *Stop* gesture and shook *xir* head. "Hang on. Weren't you the one getting on *Ae*'s case about how *wrong* it is to take people's choices away? *Ae* was going to erase people and you said that violates their consent. Isn't what you're doing the same thing?"

"Nnn-no," Zoe said with a twisted face.

//What the hell kind of question is that?// her soul vibrated. //They're not even *close* to the same thing.//

"What *Ae* was talking about was taking away people lives and freedom. What *we* did is the opposite. Once we knew it worked, we went inside each person in the world and stopped all

the vibrations that cause problems. I mean things like arrogance and greed, things that make you only care about yourself. And at the same time, we amped up empathy and cooperation and generosity. Really all we did was change how people see themselves in relation to others. When we did that, it was this instant change!” She snapped emphatically.

“Overnight, everyone in government wanted to rewrite *so much*. Like, *so. Much*. They fucking volunteered to change the whole goddamn system. And they *did*. And every fucking millionaire CEO suddenly decided they didn’t want their companies to dump loads of shit into the environment anymore, or hoarde all their wealth. They fucking changed *everything* about how they run their business. Like *that!* Do you have any idea how quickly things changed because of that? Fuck, Cory, you would have *loved* to see it! People did such fucking *amazing* things, because they suddenly had all the resources and motivation for it. You had fucking *kids* in India inventing things to clean the goddamn ocean, and then Bill fucking Gates and Warren Buffet *jumped* to make more of it. And they did it for *free*. Cory do you have any idea how *blown* my goddamn *mind* was watching all this shit happen?”

Cory could see it now, in her face, in the way she narrated with such animated gestures.

“I fucking cried. For real. I’m talking massive sobbing. People came together and *solved so many problems*, on their goddamn *own*, all because we made just a few little changes to their souls.”

She shook her head. “Can you believe? It was such a small, stupid thing keeping all this from happening. Just a little tiny thing. So *stupid!*” She heaved out a loud, angry breath. “But we fixed it. And before you have any other dumb thoughts let me be *clear*.” She leaned forward with a finger pointed toward xir nose. “We didn’t change anything else about people. We left all the things that make people who they are, as individuals. We left that alone. People still have their

own personalities and hobbies and music tastes and whatnot. We just made it so they want the world to be a place where *everyone* can thrive and be happy.”

“Even animals,” Vio said, his eyes focused intently on his own flexing and morphing hands.

Zoe looked at him and nodded, then continued to Cory, “Right, even animals. And that means we don’t have all these toxic things like sexism or racism anymore. So everyone has *way more* freedom than they did before because there aren’t all these pressures to fit in and be ‘normal’ anymore. You can be who you are, whatever that is. And listen, we don’t even have *money* anymore! Can you wrap your head around that? Money is *gone*! People got rid of it because they figured out how to run things without it. People just straight up imagined a world without money and were like, ‘Yeah, let’s do it’.”

Zoe made an explosion noise and bloomed her hands open at her temples.

“I didn’t think we’d reach something like that for *generations*, but people got there. No one has to worry about starving or losing their home anymore. Everyone wants to make sure everyone else is taken care of, and everyone wants to contribute something to the community.”

She held up her hands and knit them together with tightly interlocked fingers.

“It’s *beautiful*. It’s the way it *should* be! And it’s not even that people are *perfect*. They still make mistakes, but they’re not the kind of fuck-ups that kill the planet, you know? And they actually *listen* to each other, and no one is too proud to admit their wrong and learn from their mistakes. Everyone keeps trying to do better.”

She held out a hand as if offering her question.

“I know I’m rambling, but, do you hear what I’m saying? Yeah, we changed people’s souls a little without their knowledge or consent, but because we did that, people aren’t shitty anymore, and they can finally reach their full potential! We can see what all human creativity

and ingenuity can do. We can see the kind of society that Aki and I and so many of us were working for. A *better* kind, even! We were *never* going to reach this point by fighting an uphill battle. There were just too many people addicted to their egos and the status quo. People wanted to *climb* the ladder rather than *dismantle* it. But that's *gone* now! And it's the most amazing fucking thing."

Her hands shook as she held them in the air.

"Fucking *shit*, the things we've *seen*, even in just a few years! I can't even begin to imagine what comes next."

"It feels like we're really entering the future now," Aki agreed.

Zoe nodded and then leaned her head down to nuzzle Aki's shoulder. "Sorry, that was a rant."

Aki reached up a hand and stroked Zoe's head. "No worries, I love it when you get excited."

Zoe grinned. "I'll let you say something now."

Aki kept stroking her hair as she took her turn. "We could have changed a lot more than we did, honestly. But we left most things alone so that people could do the work themselves. And they're coming up with all sorts of new technologies on their own. And it's happening *fast* because there isn't this question of profit getting in the way. If it'll be helpful, then it gets all the attention it needs."

"You did cure cancer, though," Zoe said before planting a kiss on the top of Aki's head.

"I helped a team that was *already working* on it cure cancer," Aki corrected.

"Same thing."

"Not really."

"Well you *could* have done it and taken the credit."

“Yeah, but I didn’t feel like I had to anymore.” Not now that she didn’t need to earn her parents’ acceptance. They loved Zoe. “And I feel like it’s probably better to keep a low profile.”

“So, does it look like this everywhere?” Cory asked, gesturing around to indicate the new aesthetic xe had seen outside.

“No, not exactly,” Aki answered. “Every city still has its own unique flavor and culture.”

“Yeah, it’s just now everything runs on whatever kind of energy is best for that particular environment,” Zoe added. “Mostly solar energy. *Lots* of solar energy.”

Cory nodded. Xe was trying to take it all in, and what they were saying did seem to match the image xe had gotten of the city from the walk here. But it was such a difference from what xe had known that it wasn’t fully sinking in. Somehow, this drastic change seemed more unbelievable and unreal than when xe had learned about the Infinite from Ae.

“Ok. So. If everything’s so great now, does that mean there’s no more angry rock music?”

Zoe laughed.

“Is that your way of asking about the band?”

“I was working my way to that.”

“Hm,” she snickered. “Well, to answer your first question, no. There’s still lots of different music, even angry screaming music.”

“I think it’s like fiction now though,” Aki said thoughtfully. “It’s like how you can have fantasy and science fiction to show us things that don’t exist, and people love it. Now, we still have violence in fiction and video games, and anger and sadness in music, and people still like it, but it’s not something people deal with anymore. It’s just . . . fiction. And people like to experience bad things through fiction even if they don’t want to experience those things in real life. It makes for a good story, but not a good reality.”

“Yeahhh,” Cory sighed. “That’s the fucking truth.”

“And the guys are doing really well. They’ve gotten pretty popular actually. They tour around a lot now, but they still come back and play here when they can.”

“So Zach’s doing all right?”

“Yeah, he’s doing a lot better. I mean seriously, a *lot* better. Because really, it was all the stuff around him that was causing most of his depression. There were some brain chemistry issues going on there too, and he’s still dealing with that, but it was mostly external causes. And it was the same for a lot of people, really. Once life became safer and easier, people’s mental and emotional health improved *so much*. And what an environmental change *doesn’t* fix, they can get help for because health care doesn’t cost anything. Which is never should have to begin with, but what can you do.” She shrugged and rolled her eyes.

Cory made a show of breathing in and out deeply. He tapped the wood of the chair with his knuckles, then finally said what Zoe wanted to hear.

“You know, I gotta admit. I’m impressed.”

Zoe clapped loud as thunder and laughed.

“HA! I told you! I *told* you you would be, didn’t I? Hell yeah, mission accomplished.”

Cory snorted and shook his head.

“You did it. Congratulations.”

“Do you want to see what *I* did?” Vio asked suddenly.

Everyone turned their heads to look at him.

“What did you do?” Cory asked.

“No, I want you to *see*.”

“Seriously, it’s something you should *see*,” Zoe confirmed.

“*I* want to see,” Ae said.

“It’s really great.” Vio made another wide grin, and everyone could feel the pride exuding from him in waves heavier than his twiggy body.

“I’m sure,” Ae said enthusiastically.

“I wanna see too,” Cory added. “But, I kind of had something in mind I wanted to do first. So if you want to show Ae now, you can show me later.”

“Ok.” Vio wriggled in his seat with excitement. “It’s really great. Really.” He looked like he could barely contain himself, giggling while his foot-long fingers curled into spirals and he bumped his fists together rapidly.

“You’ve got me in suspense.”

“You’ll like it. I know you will.”

“I believe you. And I like having something to look forward to.”

“What are you up to?” Aki asked.

Cory exhaled loudly. “I’m gonna go find my parents.”

“Oh,” Aki and Zoe said together.

“Yeah. But I think I’m ready now. Being out there . . .” Xe looked at Ae meaningfully. “It really helped. I got to where I feel a lot more . . . stable, I guess.” Xe turned back to Zoe. “And I wanted to say: I appreciate you. You helped me too, when I really needed it. So, thanks for that.”

Zoe smiled, sincerely now.

“You bet. I was glad you came to me. And I’m glad it helped.”

Cory nodded then looked at Ae again. “All right, so, you gonna go with Vio?” Xe was pretty sure Vio was about a minute away from grabbing Ae and pulling em off anyway.

Ae nodded with a “Yeah,” then stroked through Cory’s soul with a wave of soothing and encouraging vibrations.

//Thanks,// xe vibrated back.

“All right, well, I don’t know how long I’ll be out, but I’ll come back here when I’m done.”

“Sounds good,” Zoe said. “We’ll be here. And we still open at four, close at two. So expect people if it’s between then.”

“Got it. Kay, well . . .” Xe got up from the chair and set it back on the table, legs pointing to the ceiling. “See you . . . sometime.”

“Yep. And if you need to talk again when you get back, just let me know.”

“I will.”

And as Cory undid xir avatar to fly as an invisible wave through the city in search of the souls xe could recognize as Christopher and Carolyn Rhys, it suddenly occurred to xem to wonder: if money didn’t exist anymore, then what did xir dad, a bank executive, do now in this new society?

Xe guessed that could be one more thing to talk about when xe found them.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

### *Introduction*

The most fundamental feeling driving this project is that, I wanted to write a story that I wanted to read, the kind of story it seems no one else would ever write for me. Every choice I made during the writing process ultimately comes back to that primary motivation, and my goal here is to explain in more detail what kind of stories I want to read, and why I chose to write this one in particular.

One major force shaping that choice is the knowledge that there would be readers other than myself, which meant I needed to write a story that was not only self-indulgent, but one that could demonstrate to those readers certain things that are missing from current fiction and that could help people understand my particular nonnormative standpoint(s). Almost every story I have ever written in my life I have kept to myself, because I have always written for my own enjoyment and not to gain an audience. I have never sought attention or feedback on my work except when the story I wrote was a gift for a friend. So this story is unique in that, with it, I try to convey certain feelings and ideas in a way that I normally wouldn't, that is, for the benefit of someone who isn't already familiar with my feelings and ideas.

Before I go directly into the story itself, I will discuss a bit of background that formed the soil out of which the story grew. Firstly, I don't have any memories of being consciously influenced by anything. I don't remember ever reading a story or watching a TV show or movie and thinking "Oh, I want to do something like *that!*" I remember liking or disliking things, but I don't remember that like leading to a conscious interest in replication. When I was in elementary school, my favorite books were those by Garth Nix (*Sabriel, Lirael, Abhorsen, Shade's Children*), but I never tried to mimic anything in the style or plot. I loved the Harry Potter series early on, but I didn't want to write like J. K. Rowling.

I stopped reading for fun some time during my undergraduate studies when I realized I couldn't connect with a lot of stories or relate to most characters. I instead focused only on writing my own fiction and fanfiction because that was the only way I could find satisfying stories. But around 2015 I took a chance on N. K. Jemisin's novels, and I felt a love of reading again. Even then, however, I didn't think her style was something I wanted to *replicate*; I liked her writing because it felt like something I could have already written. Her sentence flow, word choices, and narrative structure all felt *familiar*.

Which is not to say I would have written the same stories she wrote, but the way she wrote them made me happy, the way my writing always did. And seeing "my" writing style on a printed page felt validating. It made me think that my writing style is good enough to be published, even though I don't actually want it to be.

I would say that my writing style is based on my desire to imitate anime and music. I have a kind of love-hate relationship with anime because there are so many tropes that I hate (like female characters being infantilized and sexualized at the same time, characters having cartoonishly exaggerated personalities, comedy that relies on slapstick or embarrassing situations), but when it's good, it is *good*. When a dramatic scene comes crashing in with epic music and stunningly detailed and smooth artwork that seems to expand beyond the screen, or when a tragic scene hits and everything goes quiet and still before it erupts with agony, or when the ambience in a horror scene is so creepy you can feel it dripping on your skin—those are the things I want to capture in my style.

So very often when I write, I am visualizing the scene and writing as if I my words could summon the animation. And a lot of the intense moods I want to convey, I try to do so as if I am describing a song, as if the scene has a soundtrack to it (especially since I often have an idea of what song I would have playing during any given scene).

In terms of character and story, I want to write what feels realistic and relatable to me. My goal isn't to write characters that feel generally "relatable," I want to write characters that *I* can relate to. And "realistic" here is a relative term, because there are plenty of "realistic" stories out there that feel unrealistic to me, simply because I don't think or make decisions in the same way as the characters do. Even some real people don't feel real to me. When I see Trump and Trump supporters on TV, they don't feel realistic to me; I know they exist, but they feel like villains from a children's cartoon exaggerated for effect. So while I could write a character based on such a real person, I don't think I could bring myself to do it, because it would *feel* like a caricature.

People and stories can be real without feeling "realistic" to me because of the large discrepancy between how I think and act and how other people think and act, so "realistic" probably isn't the best term. What I mean when I say I want to write "realistic" characters is that I want to write characters who make choices that seem reasonable within my own worldview. Not that every character has to do things the way I myself would do them, but that I have in mind a range of possibilities of how a character can think or act without becoming a cartoon exaggeration that's just a plot device, and I try to keep my characters within that range.

Having said that, not every character I write is one I can relate to. I do, however, want to have a strong sense of who they are as a person, and I often end up writing psychological profiles for characters that detail their motivations, personalities, family history, deepest fears and greatest aspirations, and so on. It is my main characters that I relate to the most since they are the ones I center the narrative around.

If a book has main characters I can't relate to or understand, it is hard for me to feel interested in the story as a whole. And there are some major barriers that prevent me from relating to most characters because they are so common—dare I say, *normal*. These include:

sexual attraction, desire, and energy (asexual)  
romantic attraction, desire, and love (aromantic)  
identifying with a gender (agender)  
drinking alcohol and/or enjoying alcohol (straight-edge)  
consuming any kind of non-medicinal drug (straight-edge)  
eating meat and using animals for any purpose (vegan)  
having friends (I was kind of a loner in school, and even now I don't go out of my way to be around people)

Aside from these, I'm also averse to certain personality types. So many books I have read have main characters I can't understand (usually because their thought process is so different from mine) or that I find insufferable (because of their off-putting personality). So even if a character is asexual and thus *relatable*, I still might not like them as a person.

And that is only considering the characters and stories in themselves. Taking a peek into fandom makes things so much worse, if for no other reason than a large portion of fandom culture involves shipping. And when shipping doesn't merely bore me, it makes me *angry*, either at the general *need* fans have to imagine characters in romantic and/or sexual relationships, or at specific fans who have taken a character I relate to as an asexual aromantic and put them in a sexual and/or romantic relationship. I know these fans don't know me, but it feels like a personal attack when they trample over the aspects of a character that I so rarely find and can relate to.

For this reason alone, I rarely look at fan works of anything, unless I am not emotionally invested in the source material. When I am emotionally invested, I actively avoid fandom and keep to myself so that my interpretation of characters can stay safe and preserved, either in my head or in the fanfiction I write. I am the only fanfiction writer I can trust to handle the characters I care about.

And when I care about a character, then the character is the leading star of my attention. I can write/read about or imagine them doing even the most mundane things and still enjoy it, because while a storyworld can be interesting and inspiring, without a good character engaging me with it, the storyworld ultimately falls flat. If I read a scene that is written to be dramatic and intense, even if it is written well stylistically, I don't feel anything if I am emotionally detached from the characters. Setting and plot will always be secondary to characters for me.

If I may be a little raw here for a moment, I'll elaborate on that point. I'm a fairly asocial person, but at the same time I have always craved deep intimacy with one or two friends (or what I would now call "queerplatonic partner"). Growing up I never had that, and I barely had anyone I would have called a "friend" until after I was in graduate school. So I filled the space in my life meant for real relationships with fictional characters. I wrote myself (by way of self-inserts) into stories in order to interact with them, and that provided for me a sense of relationship and intimacy that I needed to feel happy. And because of that, I didn't seek out unsatisfying relationships in real life out of desperation for human interaction. I have heard so many stories from people talking about how they dated or made friends with toxic people just because they couldn't stand being alone. I'm grateful that my writing prevented me from falling into that trap.

And that is why in much of my writing, I focus on the inner life and experience of characters, because I want to feel like I really understand and relate to them. I want to know everything about them as a way to make up for the fact that I feel so distant from people in real life, who are unknowable to me beyond what I can see on the surface. The characters I write don't have to be self-inserts or reflections of myself or my idealized self for me to relate to or understand them. But it is inevitable that I will imbue many of my characters with some fundamental qualities and values I myself have. In this story, the most important characters

portray the qualities I wanted to show to an audience, and I will discuss those in more detail later.

### *Writing Style*

In this section I want to explain my writing style and how I consciously differentiate my style from that of other authors. First I will discuss elements and subjects of stories (focusing on fantasy fiction), and then I will discuss writing style choices. I don't mean to imply by this section that I am judging certain things as "bad writing". I am sure my passionate tone might suggest that, but rationally I am aware that my taste says more about me than the writing under review. I only mean to say that I am very turned off by the things I have listed here. Some of them I have always been averse to, some I have only discovered in recent years while reading as many of the books that drew me in with their potential as I could.

I list the elements here to discuss why I either actively chose to not include them in my own writing, or why I would have never even thought to include them in the first place, and also why I am so disappointed by and tired of current fantasy fiction, since many of these elements are quite common.

### *Subject Matter*

While I used to enjoy it, I have developed a distaste for **high epic fantasy**, because this style usually means a story will have long, drawn-out plots that cause me stress and fatigue, will include an abundance of characters I will need to keep track of, and will likely be set around kingdoms and royalty, which I just have zero patience for. Reading about that form of government and social hierarchy is just tiring for me and I don't enjoy it.

Unfortunately, I also don't like **urban fantasy**, because I don't like cities. Cities as a setting, in real life and in fiction, overwhelm and depress me. I have no explanation for this other than it's just not in my nature to like clusters of tall buildings and crowded, tight-knit streets.

Related to both genres, I'm turned off by **political intrigue** and **war**. It just gets to be too complicated and I get overwhelmed with the scope of it.

In these settings, you often come across **rough and edgy protagonists**. I don't like such characters because they just come across to me as inconsiderate and rude, all the time, regardless of context, and that just rubs me the wrong way. Their hard and sometimes traumatic backgrounds are presented as an excuse for their antisocial behavior, and this is probably an attempt by the author to create an anti-hero. But for me these attempts are failures because I don't find such characters charismatic or endearing, I find them tedious and exhausting to deal with.

Another character trope I despise is the magical/supernatural protagonist who **just wants to be ~nOrMaL~** because having special powers and abilities is apparently too much trouble for them. Ashley Shuttleworth's *A Dark and Hollow Star* (2021) is the most recent iteration of this, with their protagonist Arlo, and to some extent Vehan. I will go further into this later, but I want to make it clear now that I feel a burning hatred for this trope.

And just in general, I don't like characters that **feel like tropes**. So many characters that I have encountered just feel flat, like you can neatly put them in a category or describe them in a few words ("hard-as-nails chick who drinks and kicks ass" is quite common, as "normal person who turns out to be special and has a grand destiny to fulfill"). And in general, the whole DND-esque band of misfits trope doesn't spark anything in me either.

I am also angered by the way **vampires** are often treated by other creators, to the point where I am personally offended by it. I love writing vampires, because to me, vampires make the perfect *asexual representation*. Vampires are *dead*, they have no biological functions that would make sex possible. And yet, vampire bloodsucking is often treated as a metaphor or euphemism for sex. And that makes me *angry*. When I see bloodsucking, I see *bloodsucking*. Literal

bloodsucking. I don't see it as a metaphor for sexual penetration, or as foreplay leading up to sex, I see it as the *end in itself*, because blood is what a vampire wants and needs. Vampires to me, a sex-repulsed asexual, have always felt *safe*, because in my mind they have never been sexual. But it's difficult to find any vampires in media that aren't sexual in some way, or made sexual by fans. I didn't write any vampires in this particular story, but I often write stories involving vampires because that is the primary way I can find vampires without any sexual innuendo or actual sex involved.

One *incredibly* common aspect of fantasy fiction I can't stand is fictional societies built on some kind of **discrimination and bigotry**. The discrimination can be the same as what we see in real life (such as racism, sexism, classism), or it can be unique to the story but still parallel to real life (such as social castes based on types of magic, or racism against supernatural species).

Yet another almost inescapable aspect of fiction that I can't stand is relationships based on **romance and/or sex**, and relatedly, relationships full of **conflict**. I will elaborate on this point later.

Much like how I just don't seem wired to like cities, I also just feel zero interest in **outer space, other planets, or futurist technology**. Science fiction is a very popular genre, but aesthetically, it just doesn't appeal to me, and I actively choose to not read any book or watch any media that takes place in a science fiction setting (like space ships or alien planets). I also am tired of **magical school** settings and **fairy-tale** stories or retellings.

Another genre I dislike is **mystery and suspense**. I don't have the patience for not knowing things, and suspense puts me in a painful, physical state of anxiety I don't enjoy.

### *Style*

In terms of writing style choices, I utterly hate **first-person narration**, and I resent that that mode seems to have become the dominant voice in current publications. Related to that, very

often books are also written in the **present tense**, sometimes in combination with the first-person narration. Again, I don't know why this has become so common, but I hate it, and it is a trend I would like to see put to an end. When I read a book in present tense, my only thought is that this must be a draft and the author simply hasn't gone through to make it the final version yet.

Beyond the foundational narrative voice, I'm also tired of "**witty**" **writing**, whether in dialogue or narration. Often times I find myself scanning over a line that feels so quippy, like a young theater kid trying so hard to sound cool and clever, that my eyes roll. And I am tired of excessive banter, mostly because the banter just isn't *good*. It doesn't sound natural, like anything I or the people I know in real life would say. It feels like what a person who has never spoken to human beings *thinks* banter sounds like, because it's what they've heard in scripted TV. But I don't like that kind of punchy, dramatic dialogue in TV or movies either, so I resent seeing it in books too.

To go more in depth on my thoughts regarding some of these elements, I will start here. I'm tired of **unnatural dialogue** in general, punchy or not. I'm just genuinely frustrated by how few characters actually sound, to my ears, like real people speaking. On one hand, it seems to me that authors have become so afraid of exposition that they sacrifice natural dialogue to avoid it and make characters say things purely for the readers' benefit. I don't believe this is the best solution.

I also think part of this is tied to authors striving to achieve the coveted "unique voice" for their characters that reviewers so often seek (and complain about when they feel their expectations aren't met). It's so common to see authors put great effort into giving their characters a distinct voice that they end up making dialogue feel forced and artificial, like a high school play, and thus *painful* for me to read. Personally, I focus on making characters sound natural to my own ears, and I make their distinctions less in their unique speech *styles* and more

in the *content* of their speech. Stylizing speech patterns only makes a character feel like a *character* performing a scripted role rather than a real *person* just talking in normal life.

Take, for example, this line from Kat Howard's *An Unkindness of Magicians*:

“Your mother [. . .] is going to lose her Chanel-wearing shit when she finds out you're doing this.” (7)

Or this exchange between two college students found in Leigh Bardugo's adult novel

*Ninth House*:

“The Bonesmen like them as nuts as possible,” Darlington had told her. “They think it makes for better predictions.” When she'd asked him why, he'd just said, “The crazier the *victima*, the closer to God.”

“Is that true?”

“*It is only through mystery and madness that the soul is revealed,*” he'd quoted. Then he'd shrugged. “Their bank balances say yes.”

“And we're okay with this?” Alex had asked Darlington. “With people getting cut open so Chauncey can redecorate his summer home?”

“Never met a Chauncey,” he'd said. “Still hoping.” Then he'd paused, standing in the armory, his face grave. “Nothing is going to stop this. Too many powerful people rely on what the societies can do. Before Lethe existed, no one was keeping watch. So you can make futile bleating noises in protest and lose your scholarship, or you can stay here, do your job, and do the most good you can.” (13-14)

This does not sound, in my head, like the way real eighteen-year-olds speak. And it is all the more unnatural given that the setting is in the real world, not a fantasy world the author created. These are supposed to feel like real college students, but they sound like the kinds of

teens you see in a drama TV show, that is, overly scripted and dramatic (and played by actors in their mid- to late-twenties).

And speaking of dramatic, I don't like dramatic **cliff hangers** at the end of chapters, because again, they're like scenes in a TV show, like where the lead character calls someone, tells them something cryptic and dramatic, then hangs up without any explanation just before it cuts to a commercial break. It feels incredibly unrealistic and unhelpful.

Take, for example, this last paragraph of chapter eight in Robert Bennett Jackson's *Foundryside*:

“And now you, Sancia Grado,” said Giovanni, tying up the sack, “at all of five foot no inches, and a hundred and nothing pounds, are going to take them all on.” He held it out to her, grinning. “Good luck.” (111)

I can't imagine anyone really saying this line, and again, it feels more like an attempt to make exposition more palatable by having it come from a character rather than narration.

And take this example from chapter four of Suyi Davies Okungbowa's *David Mogo, Godhunter*:

“If we [gods] are the keepers of existence, why else will anyone want us? Why else have people hunted us for ages long before you were born?”

Papa Udi blinks. Disbelief is written all over his face. “Ajala wan—”

“—make orisha, yes,” Kehinda says, sitting back into the circle, hugging her legs to herself. “He wants to make gods, and you, orisha ‘daji, have just given him the ingredients.” (51)

And that's the end of the chapter. I hate that. That's not the end of the conversation, and cutting it off there as if it is feels so artificial, especially since the conversation doesn't pick up in

the next chapter. It feels like pure craft rather than substance, meant to make a reader feel a sense of drama rather than feel immersed in a lifelike scene.

Likewise, one section in chapter seven ends with:

“Help us,” Femi Onipede says, her eyes shiny with almost-tears. “Help us, please.” (79)

Surely there is so much more that is said after this deep, heartfelt plea, a conversation that could do much to reveal information about the situation, or show character relationships and personalities. But the author chose to end it here, on this line. Why? I can’t say with certainty, I just know that to me, it feels like a gimmick to create drama.

Another kind of unrealistic dialogue I see is characters giving **lectures and monologues**, because in real life these monologues would almost certainly have been interrupted at some point. I don’t mind monologues when a character is pouring their heart out to a sympathetic listener, in a scene that is reminiscent of a therapy session. In that context I actually find them cathartic and enjoyable. But in a scene where two antagonistic characters are arguing over something they are emotionally invested in, I can’t believe that one would just stand there and listen to the other go on and on when they think what that other person is saying is wrong or stupid or misinformed. That kind of patience is too rare to be believable, unless a strong precedent has been set in the story showing that the listening character is, in fact, like that.

I can sympathize with the desire to go on a rant and tell someone I disagree with everything I think about their wrong opinion, but I’m also very aware that I would not be able to speak for more than thirty seconds, if that, before they started trying to talk over me. So if a character is going to go on a rant, I need there to be a mechanism in place that makes it believable for the rant to reach its conclusion.

Going back to **narrative voice**, I want to point out this one line from a review I read on *Goodreads*:

“Kuang made a very smart decision when she wrote this book in third person through mostly Rin’s perspective.” (Sofia)

This comment made me laugh, because for me, third person is the *default* and not a choice I would have to make consciously. It always has been. But remarking that it is a “smart” choice implies it required thought. It wasn’t until I started reading a lot of recent publications that I realized how common first-person voice has become, probably to the point of being the default mode for a lot of writers and readers. This review seems to imply as much, with its suggestion that deviating from first to third person is noteworthy.

I don’t know why this is the case, but on a visceral level, it disgusts me. I genuinely feel an almost instinctual repulsion to first-person narration. But beyond just that feeling, *logically*, first-person narration doesn’t make sense to me, because I can’t stop wondering who the narrator—a character in the book—is talking to. Why are they narrating this story? What has prompted them to do so? Who is their imagined reader/listener? It can’t be *me*, the real reader, because the character doesn’t know me. So who are they narrating for? Very rarely is there an explanation, and I am just supposed to take it for granted that this storytelling makes sense. But I can’t: it feels so artificial and unnatural, and makes me pull away emotionally from the story.

And when first-person is combined with present tense, that increases my frustration. Why is the character narrating things *as they happen*? Again, who would they be narrating to? Are they narrating to themselves in their head? I don’t know, I don’t know what the situation is that would call for this kind of narrative point of view.

This paragraph from *David Mogo, Godhunter* is a shining example. David Mogo is the narrator of the present tense story, and he narrates, “And it is my job to try and bring this Lagos

back to them. It's what Papa Udi would have wanted—would want (stop speaking about them in past tense, you idiot; how do you know they're dead?). It's what Fati, Taiwo and Kehinde would have wanted—agh, would want (you're doing it again, David). It's what my mother would want" (177). I read this and have to ask, *who is he narrating to?* It sounds like he's talking to himself, but why would someone narrate their actions and experiences as they happen? I have no reason to accept the premise of this narration, so I feel a constant, grinding frustration as I read through it.

I have also realized recently that one of the things that irks me about first-person narrative (and present tense especially) is how it seems to be used as an excuse to info dump. Having the story told by a single person rather than a disembodied voice seems to be a justification for having the character give lots of background information to the reader. Because it's as if the narrator is talking to a peer, someone they recognize as a person the way we are supposed to recognize the narrator as a person, and so the narrator provides information they think the reader wants or needs like anyone telling a story in real life would.

But I resent that trick. When I encounter it, my thought is, "You think you can just talk to me like we're friends or something? I didn't come here to get my ear talked off by some stranger, I came here to get immersed in a world that feels formed by an invisible hand." When a character is telling me the story, the world has an extra layer of construction to it that sets a wall between me and it. I know that a third person voice is also constructed, but it *feels* less constructed because the one *doing* the construction is less visible. A first-person voice highlights the constructedness of the story in a way that, for whatever reason, doesn't appeal to my personal taste.

With the problem of **characters feeling like tropes**, I believe the fundamental issue for me is that I do not consider some of the "complexities" authors add to their characters to be true

complexities. For example, when a character who has become hardened by their rough background shows that they can still be soft and caring under the right circumstances or with the right company. This is treated as a complexity, but I don't believe it is. The "complexity" doesn't actually round out a character, it follows a trope.

When I say I want characters who feel complex and *real*, I mean characters who feel like people I've met in my own life. I've never met a jaded cynic who speaks disrespectfully to everyone because they can't be bothered to be polite (like Sancia, from *Foundryside*), but I have met a geochemist who loves gardening, cooking, and raising chickens. I've met a jack-of-all-trades who is kind and generous but besieged by bad luck, is constantly getting arrested, and reads books when he's not getting pulled into fights. I've met a half-Japanese goth living in Indiana who holds leftist values and collects *kawaii* toys from ebay. And I've never felt like I could boil any of them down to a tag descriptor because it doesn't do them justice. But for so many characters, I've felt like I could summarize them in one sentence and that would be enough to understand them. I want to write characters who don't feel like tropes but like someone I could pass on the street, someone messy and hard to summarize. I'm tired of characters feeling too neat.

As an aromantic who has never experienced romantic attraction, and a sex-repulsed asexual, I feel zero connection with **romance** and physically disgusted by **sex scenes** (or scenes that suggest sexual intent). The way romance is presented in media, it seems very awkward. I'm not interested in seeing two characters stare longingly at each other and wax poetic about how beautiful the other is. And even when a romance story is meant to explore the dynamic between two characters (such as the ever-popular enemies-to-lovers trope), the romance part actually ruins it for me, because I don't understand all the gushing emotions that seem to come with romantic love.

One trope I see pop up a lot in romance is moments in which one character notices how beautiful/handsome/attractive another character is while trying to stay focused on something else. This usually includes a lush description of lips, eye lashes, and skin as the character gets lost in the beauty of the features. I can't relate to these moments and I find them rather repulsive.

The relationship and love that I value is *friendship*. I like intimate friendships that center on emotional understanding and closeness rather than anything physical, though I can enjoy sensual partnerships if they're done *precisely* the way I want. The instant things feel romantic or sexual, I shut down.

And no matter the relationship, I can't stand there being a lot of heated **arguments or fights**, because I can't understand how anyone would want to deal with that. I don't understand what is holding a relationship together if the people in it are always getting angry with each other. I don't think two people have to be in perfect agreement on everything, but when they do have disagreements, if they can't have a reasonable, rational, and respectful conversation about it, then the relationship is too volatile for me to comprehend.

And the last thing I want to elaborate on is **bigotry**. I am so tired of wading through bigotry in my fiction. It's exhausting and infuriating enough seeing the ugliness and harm of bigotry play out in real life, I don't want it weighing down what could otherwise be a fun and interesting fantasy as well, as almost always happens in the books I choose to read.

And it's only made worse when it's treated with a heavy hand, because I feel like I'm a choir the author is trying to preach to. When I encounter bigotry in a story, I mostly roll my eyes and think, "Yes, yes, I *know*, bigotry is *bad*, we don't have to go over this." It makes me wonder who is it for? Does the author think they are teaching something new to their readers? When R. F. Kuang has her protagonist Rin experience classism in military school and the horrors of war and genocide (*The Poppy War*), when Silvia Moreno-Garcia has her protagonist Casiopea

experience sexism (*Gods of Jade and Shadow*), when Tasha Suri has her protagonist Mehr experience racism, colorism, and religious discrimination (*Empire of Sand*), who is it for? These are all examples of *overt* bigotry that is put in the spotlight in the story, and I can't help wondering who is enjoying it? Who needs to learn about it? I don't, and that's why it just feels like dead weight to me. And to be blunt, it gives the impression that fantasy authors don't think it's possible to have a compelling story if it doesn't involve something as "epic" as war or as morally engaging as social injustice.

My goal isn't to handle bigotry. My goal is to represent the strangeness of the world that I experience because of my non-normative identities. I don't experience *bigotry*, I experience a sense of otherness and outsider-ness. I don't intend to condemn any particular character for their bigotry or to highlight corrupted socio-political power dynamics, I want to make clear that the world, as it is, feels strange and confining even when there is no explicit discrimination or bigotry taking place.

So these are the things that I prefer not to see in the books I read, and are things I keep out of my own writing. I hope by discussing them here, my readers will have some understanding behind choices I have made in my narrative style, characters, and plot. And I want to be clear about how serious I am about these things. N. K. Jemisin is one of my favorite authors and has written some of my favorite books of all time. But I have not read and do not plan to read her newest novel *The City We Became* (2020) because it contains urban settings (New York, in this case), first-person voice, and present tense.

There are other books that, even though the synopsis sounds otherwise intriguing or appealing, because it contains some element I can't compromise on, I choose not to read. For example, *Gideon the Ninth* by Tamsyn Muir, because it takes place in space.

And there have been books that, when I began reading them without knowing they contained some element, I felt great disappointment in when I realized it had, for example, romance (*Strange the Dreamer*), or annoying dialogue (*Star Daughter*), or first-person narration (*David Mogo*, *Godhunter*).

Given these criteria, I am sure it is no wonder why I don't derive much pleasure from most stories currently available. But, to give an idea of the kind of stories I do like and enjoy, and would like to see more of, I can offer a few examples that I consider as close to perfect, according to my tastes, as I have come across. I will note that all of these are, in fact, not American, which is not surprising considering that I don't engage with much American media, and all the reading I have done recently was more out of a sense of obligation to this project, that is, to maintain an idea of the state of current fantasy fiction, and not out of a genuine, personal interest. It is beyond this scope of this project to discuss how the representations in these texts are framed in the original Japanese culture, so I will stay focused on my own personal feelings engaging with the texts. I will provide a quick summary of each story, not so much to give an objective encapsulation but to describe it in the terms that I interpreted it. Then I will provide a brief discussion of specific elements that gifted me an experience of joy and delight.

***Vinland Saga*** (anime only, I have not read the manga)

The main character, Thorfinn, is so focused on getting revenge for his father's murder that he thinks of nothing else, leading him to live a solitary life with no romantic or sexual interest whatsoever. I love Thorfinn as a character because his obsession with revenge, in effect, has made him asexual and aromantic because his only orientation is toward Askeladd, who has a passionate desire to kill, and motivated by that passion he becomes incredibly strong, athletic, and skilled as an assassin. The most interesting relationships explored in this story are those of

hatred, politics, and friendship, and these are given priority by the animation and music reaching its peak quality when these relationships are explored on screen.

***Yuukoku no Moriarty*** (again, anime only, I have not read the manga)

The main characters (three aristocrat brothers) are so focused on changing society to create equality among all people that they think of nothing else, leading them all to live without any romantic or sexual interest whatsoever. The central character is William James Moriarty, the famous rival of Sherlock Holmes, and I have an intense love for him because he is absolutely gorgeous (my aesthetic attraction coming into play), he has a similar values system to me that motivates him to help oppressed people take revenge on their oppressors, and I feel zero sexual or romantic energy from him. While of course fandom ships him with Sherlock, I see their relationship as so much more interesting than anything sexual or romantic: they are obviously attracted to each other's intelligence and shared love of solving puzzles, and they feel a sense of mutual understanding that they don't with anyone else. They are uniquely compatible in that way, and I can't understand why most fans inevitably translate that into sexual and/or romantic feelings when in my experience, that feeling of compatibility has zero relation to either sex or romance. Having said that, however, I am much more interested in his relationship with his brothers, because they share the same values and goals, whereas I find Sherlock fairly annoying, for various reasons, one being that Sherlock is treated as a comical character while the Moriarty brothers are treated very seriously.

***Banana Fish*** (again, anime only, I have not read the manga)

Two teens (one American, one Japanese) meet, and in the midst of a mystery about a dangerous drug and maneuvering among gang wars, they quickly become intimate friends. I genuinely love the relationship that Ash and Eiji have because they obviously trust each other in

an emotional way that makes them feel safe opening up to each other in ways they don't with anyone else. To everyone else, Ash is a violent, cunning, manipulative gang leader, but when he is alone with Eiji he is able to be honest about his fears, vulnerabilities, and softer emotions, and he clearly feels the need for someone he trusts that way because in one scene, he tearfully begs Eiji to stay with him. While most fans read sexual/romantic love into it, this scene is so raw with the kind of nonsexual, nonromantic intimacy I experience.

***Hunter x Hunter*** (2011) (again, anime only, I have not read the manga)

Two young boys very quickly become best friends after they meet, and in their time adventuring together, develop massive amounts of magical power that they then use to fight various enemies, including a new race that threatens to exterminate humans.

***Tenshi Kinryouku*** (manga only)

A human is the reincarnation of an angel and goes on journeys through earth, hell, and heaven fighting another angel who wants to kill god. This story directly feeds my interest in representations of religion, gods, and demons in media, and the art is stunningly beautiful.

***Noblesse*** (webcomic and anime)

A uniquely special and powerful vampire is a recluse who meets a human obsessed with gaining enormous amounts of power, and the two become very close friends for hundreds of years into the present day, when they must work with new friends to prevent another human from also gaining massive amounts of power and threatening the stability of the world. The titular character, Raziel, is one of my favorites because he uses his unparalleled level of power to protect his friends, and he never shows interest in sexual or romantic relationships, he just wants to live a simple happy life with his friends.

***Uragiri wa Boku no Namae wo Shitteiru*** (anime and manga)

A demon (Luka) and magical human (Yuki) fall in love despite being enemy races, and when Yuki dies and is reincarnated, Luka still loves her/him and protects him regardless of whether Yuki feels the same love he did in his previous life with Luka. What I love is that so many people ask Luka if he is bothered that Yuki reincarnated as a man, and Luka always says no, Yuki's soul is the same no matter what, and so Luka loves Yuki regardless of sex/gender. On top of that, the love Luka feels is never shown to be based on any sexual or physical desire, he loves Yuki even when his relationship with the reincarnated Yuki is fairly nonphysical. And besides Luka and Yuki, there are several other intimate partnerships among the main characters that are not romantic or sexual but involve great levels of trust, understanding, and emotional connection.

#### *Literary Considerations*

At the end of this document, I have attached my original prospectus as an appendix, as a way of documenting the transformation of my project from literary study to creative work. I started my exams and dissertation with an interest in how black women authors constructed things like race, gender, sexuality (or really, intimacy), and religion within fantasy, inspired by my love for N. K. Jemisin's books, which made me feel a joy in reading that I had not experienced in a long time. But in the course of researching and writing for that project, my personal life took a dramatic change and I found myself deeply immersed in fiction writing, to the point that I couldn't bring myself to want to do anything else. And so, eventually, my project changed to one where I could channel that fiction writing into a scholarly endeavor. The initial literary background is still here in this project, but the proportions have shifted. This project is now primarily focused on asexual and aromantic intimacy, as well as agender identity, both individually and socially, since these are both personal experiences I have a strong sociopolitical interest in.

My research regarding race and fantasy led me to find a common theme of black readers feeling alienated from fantasy and science fiction in the past because most stories were written by white authors and centered white characters. Knowing that, I was interesting in seeing how black authors constructed and represented race in their fantasy fiction, and how that could contribute to contemporary conversations about race “in real life” such as responding to, challenging, and condemning real-life racism in the present and past; imagining alternative possibilities, even if not for a potential real future at least for an emotional catharsis through new creations; and building more and diverse representation of black characters.

I was also interested in how fantasy is and could be used to construct and represent queerness, both in terms of gender (identity, expression, norms) and sexuality. Being white, I can't share in the same experience of not seeing my race or culture represented in media, but I can empathize with the experience of feeling alienated from media due to other aspects like gender and sexual orientation. As an agender, aromantic, asexual person, I was and am especially interested in the deconstruction of gender as a concept and the formation of societies that do not prioritize sexual or romantic relationships.

Underpinning my approach to this was my own sense of self; years of participation in online asexual and aromantic communities, even participation in research studies about asexuality, as a personal hobby; and reading current research in asexuality studies and related topics within queer studies.

Reading this story, you can see issues of relationships and intimacy come to the center of discussion, especially when Cory talks about xir relationship with Ae. The way I write about these issues is similar to the findings of research on asexuality. For example, Matt Dawson et al., in their 2016 article “Negotiating the Boundaries of Intimacy: The Personal Lives of Asexual People”, write that when sex is removed from the definition of “intimacy”—two things which

are often treated interchangeably, sometimes using “intimate” as a euphemism for “sexual”—then “(t)his creates the need for new forms of language to describe the relationships asexual people engage in, beyond simple ‘single’ and ‘coupled’ definitions” (351), which Cory brings up when people ask if xe and Ae are dating.

Cory’s frustration with the limits of existing language and the corresponding limits of social imagination is my own: I wish society had a broader vocabulary for relationships, and without the hierarchy of valuing romantic/sexual relationships over others. (I would like to point out that “romance” is considered a genre while “friendship” and “family” are not, so even in media, romantic feelings, love, attraction, and relationships are singled out as worthy of categorization.) For people like me—whether asexual or not, since non-asexual people can place a high value their nonsexual relationships—intimacy has nothing to do with sex and is more a matter of trust, comfort, mutual understanding, shared interests, and emotional bonding (see Hille for more discussion on this).

I consider myself a gender abolitionist and relationship anarchist. That is, I believe the world would be better off without the concept of gender and that as a society we should aim for that goal, and I also believe that there is no inherent value for any kind of relationship and that individuals, not social structures, are the ones who should decide the value of their own relationships and the way those relationships play into their life choices. Now, while these are my ideals, I am under no illusion that we can or will reach these goals as a society any time soon, if ever. And that is why I see fantasy as a valuable means for imagining worlds and societies where these ideals are achieved. It is much easier to imagine *fantasy* societies that function this way than to believe that the real world will ever achieve something that is so antithetical to the norms we have been living with for ages.

And unfortunately, this is where I would have to say that I do not see fantasy being used to fulfill this great potential it has. Most of the time, any queerness represented in fantasy is tokenism or just adding in gay or trans characters (even if they are protagonists) into a society that is still predominantly cisgender and heterosexual. I personally do not feel satisfied with this. I do not get excited when a story has one token nonbinary character represented in an otherwise binary gender system (for example, Iktan in Roanhorse's *Black Sun*, and Ardith in Caruso's *The Obsidian Tower*). It is actually very disappointing how little variety there is in gender and sexuality constructs in fantasy.

Even the most radical of gender-norm defying books that get brought up in these discussions are limited and lacking. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood/Xenogenesis* trilogy tend to be lauded for breaking open sex and gender by having nonhuman species that do not conform to human understandings of strictly male/female binaries, and certainly these are groundbreaking texts, but it is always these two that are mentioned. A few notable outliers proves how rare it is for this kind of "radical" playing with sex and gender. (And funnily enough, they are classified as "science fiction" rather than "fantasy", which underlines my sense that fantasy as a genre is not being used as creatively as it could be.) But even these outliers don't go as far as I would like to see. These authors only add in an extra gender and sex to the binary, in the case of Butler, or in the case of Le Guin, replace the "or" of the binary with "and" to make androgyny rather than something else. Both methods still rely heavily on the binary rather than start from scratch.

I understand, of course, that representation of existing gender and sexual identities is valuable for most people because they like to see themselves in media, and I don't want to be completely critical of that. But while these identities are finding their representation growing, my identities and visions are not, which exacerbates my frustration.

And to the point of representation, my ideal hope is that representing varied constructs can raise awareness and even consciousness of the artificiality of current norms. To borrow the words of Ela Przybylo and Kristina Gupta, “asexuality studies asks not only for queer communities and society more broadly to accept asexuality but also demands that everyone take the concerns of asexuality seriously in how they think about their own modes of attraction and relationships. Thus, the contributions of asexuality studies matter to everyone, as they help us all question the compulsory nature of sex and romance” (viii). Representation of new ideas in media has a history of affecting people, whether on an individual level or that of global culture (à la *Harry Potter*), and I would like to see that effect be used in the aim toward deconstructing gender and relationship hierarchies.

On a more personal note though, I would like to return the idea of representation versus alienation. While most of the time, when I see the idea of “representation” discussed, I see it in terms of how important it is for minorities to see themselves being and accomplishing things that are overrepresented by the dominant group. It is said that readers/viewers being able to see characters like themselves represented in media is important in the development of a reader/viewer’s imagination of what they themselves can be and accomplish. And that is certainly important. I want to discuss representation from a different angle, though, because for me, I don’t think a lack of representation has ever made me feel like the possibilities of my life are limited. To be sure, I have thought I would never find a companion who I could share my life with in a passionate yet asexual-aromantic way, but that stemmed more from my incredibly specific requirements for such a companion and less from a lack of such relationships in media allowing me to see it was possible.

What I want to mention, which seems incredibly obvious but which may be taken too much for granted, is that a lack of representation can lead to disengagement with a text and less

pleasure derived from it, especially when the lack of representation is fairly ubiquitous. I believe I can blame my lack of interest in reading over the last few years almost directly to the lack of characters I can relate to or understand, because they have qualities that are so far removed from my own experiences of self and the world that I feel a wall between myself and them. If this was just the case for a handful of texts, that would be one thing, but I feel this way for the vast majority of texts that I read. I and my way of being are not represented in almost any book or media, and that feels like a systematic exclusion that, rather than making me feel limited as a person, only makes me feel like there is no point in trying to engage with media anymore. Why must I always be the one who has to understand the other? Why do creators never want to engage with someone like me? Why would I bother understanding everyone else when I never feel understood?

It is that kind of exhaustion and resentment that compels me to isolate myself in a world of my own writing and my own characters, where I can understand on an empathetic level everything that is happening. With other creators' work, I can understand in a kind of theoretical way why characters act and feel the way they do, but it is so foreign to me that I can't bring myself to truly empathize with their way of thinking and being, and that disconnect makes the landscape of existing texts feel uninviting. Not in a malicious or deliberate way, but simply in the way of ignorance. Creators don't know people like me, so they don't make characters like me. Or perhaps they simply don't find people like me interesting enough to create characters of. I often tell people half-jokingly that I am a pretty boring person because I spend my time by myself with simple hobbies like listening to music, writing, and studying Japanese, but the reality is I feel like my inner life is incredibly interesting and fulfilling. I wouldn't want to live in anyone else's head. I am at home in and with myself, but I understand that my homebody lifestyle from the outside looks tame and boring. So I can look at myself from the perspective of

others, but based on experience, I do not expect anyone else to be able to understand me, because where would they have encountered anyone like me beforehand to understand? Not in media. Meanwhile I encounter all sorts of other people, so I feel like I have a broad range to draw on for understanding others, especially the dominant groups.

Such is the way of things, as a minority, but still, this is a driving motivation in my creative work and is therefore important to mention. Representation for me is not about validation, it is fundamentally about being able to relate to and understand characters, and by understanding the characters—their motivations and choices—I can better understand the story driven by them. To be blunt, I literally cannot empathize with sexual attraction or desire, and characters who feel/experience it simply do not make sense to me, nor do stories that revolve around characters' choices regarding sex. I do not need asexual representation to feel secure in myself or to feel hope that I can be a protagonist in my own life; I want asexual representation so that I can understand characters (or at least that one aspect of them) and feel pleasure in reading because of it. And I want enough asexual representation that I don't feel excluded from the majority of media. I am tired of token representation when it does occur. I want asexual representation to reflect a world that welcomes asexuality as a vibrant and diverse orientation. If there was an abundance of representation, I wouldn't feel resentment anymore. I would feel like I could open a book without having already resigned myself to knowing I won't be able to relate to any of the characters in it.

There is one more point on representation I would like to address, and that is how it is treated within fandom. Fandom is notorious for being a space heavily dedicated to shipping (that is, creating fan works that focus on two or more characters in sexual/romantic relationships, whether they were presented that way explicitly in media or not), which is one reason why I

actively avoid crossing into fandom spaces. And that is frustrating to be sure, but my deeper frustration comes when shipping intersects with the desire for LGBTQ representation.

To be clear, I am deeply sympathetic to gay people who are desperate to see themselves in the media they consume, but at the same time, I resent when gay fans seem to monopolize plots or characters for themselves. I understand when a reader reads a queer-coded character and claims “They’re gay!” by pointing to all the cues that aren’t *explicitly* gay but are easily interpreted as representations of a gay experience. But I feel hurt and even offended when this interpretation is declared with certainty when I, an asexual aromantic, can read the same character as ace/aro because those same cues also seem to represent me and my ace/aro experience. I am bothered by how much queer-coding is taken to be a representation of sexual and/or romantic desire when, from my perspective, it can also be so easily seen as a representation of no sexual or romantic desire at all.

I am not saying my interpretation is correct or better, I am only saying I find it frustrating that other LGBTQ readers want to hoard all the queer coding for themselves and claim something is *obviously* gay. I want us to be able to say that a character or plot has parallels to various queer experiences that people can relate to based on their various identities. That should be easy enough to agree to. Gay, trans, and ace people can all feel themselves represented by a character because the coding is open enough to be interpreted as any LGBTQ experience, and because I would not claim definitively that a character is exclusively and obviously ace or aro (even if in my heart of hearts I feel that way), it feels like a betrayal when a gay fan comes out and aggressively asserts that their reading of a character as gay is the sensible one. Even when I know that their assertion is more a push against reading a character as straight and not meant as an attack on asexuality, it still hurts to know that asexuality is thought so little of that even gay fans can’t read asexuality in a text when it feels so loud to an ace reader like me.

For example, James Somerton goes through the history of Disney and its queer coding of various characters in historical context. It is a very insightful video, but what I would say in response is that queer coding, especially when used in a pernicious way to signal a villain is villainous, does not necessitate a particular queer interpretation. While learning the historical background of texts can show what might be implied by the authors, I also think we can, at the same time, honor the interpretations of readers—queer readers especially—who don't have that contextual knowledge to draw on and who only look at the text itself to find themselves and their experiences. The author intentions and historical context can give insight into why characters are represented in certain ways, but unless a character states explicitly what their sexual orientation is, I am allowed to say a character feels asexual and aromantic to me. All the Disney villains Somerton discusses in his video may be deliberately coded as gay, but because on screen they do not have love interests, I feel a connection to them.

And that is not to say that villains make any better ace/aro representation than they do gay representation, but it is strange to me that characters who show zero love interest, which seems like the primary point, are considered gay before they are considered ace because of other *cultural* cues. To me, the trappings of their personality don't signal a necessary interpretation of their sexuality one way or another. I focus on the fact that they have goals and motives that have no relation to sexuality and recognize that as a familiar experience for me. But other people see fashion choices, mannerisms, or sassy attitudes and think "GAYYYYY!!!" And that leads to fandom spaces being predominantly communities built around turning these "closeted" gay characters into explicit gay characters in explicit sexual relationships.

This inevitably happens with any close friendship in a text. When I look at a strong friendship, I see a representation of my own passionate, nonsexual, nonromantic friendships, because what is shown is intimacy that comprises emotional closeness and support, trust, and

intense feelings. But most fans see that intimacy and interpret it as romantic and/or sexual attraction, and then go so far as to accuse anyone who can't see the romantic/sexual attraction as homophobic if the friendship is between two male or two female characters. What frustrates me more than the apparent compulsion to read romantic/sexual feelings into everything is the bulldozing over any possibility of asexual/aromantic interpretations, the audacity of claiming a correct interpretation when I have just as much evidence to support mine. And knowing that fans look for any excuse to ship characters, I feel it necessary to make my characters almost *painfully* explicitly asexual and aromantic. But even then, there are still fans who will desperately come up with ways to put asexual characters in sexual relationships and aromantic characters in romantic relationships.

So creating explicitly asexual and aromantic characters is certainly important work, and on the other side, more works that discuss characters in terms of asexuality and aromanticism can help counterbalance the overwhelming amount of fan interpretations. Here I will point to Anna Kurowicka's article as a good example of applying an asexual lens to literary texts when the texts themselves are not deliberately written to be asexual representation. This is a position that asexual fans find ourselves in very often, since most media is not written with asexual representation in mind. Yet we can find ourselves and experiences in texts when the creators of that texts most certainly had other things in mind. And Kurowicka gives an example of not only reading as a fan but of engaging with a work using scholarly theories and methods to ground the asexual interpretation and show what the text offers in terms of representation when considered through and with certain concepts from queer theory and asexuality studies. If I intended to continue as a scholar, I would do this kind of work as well. Unfortunately, I don't believe I have the patience to be a scholar, so I will make do as a fan and a writer.

*The Story*

If I were to very briefly summarize the story, I would say it is about a human, Cory, who hates being human, and then meets a non-human entity that feels like that first person xe has ever understood and been understood by. While Cory desires to break out of xir humanity to become like the entity, named Ae, Ae observes humans with a detached curiosity until something happens to make Ae consider wiping out all humans. And at that point, it is up to the characters Zoe and Aki, friends of Cory, to have an ethical discussion about human potential, because Cory is not the one who is going to argue for humanity's continued existence.

Cory represents the part of me that is cynical and exhausted with humans and just wants to get away. Ae is the part of me that feels different from humans and wouldn't mind ending the human experiment completely. Zoe is the part of me that has a solution that would make living in a human society not only bearable but enjoyable. This story puts those three parts in conversation with each other.

As I said earlier, I'm not interested in using the story—its setting or plot—to explore *bigotry*; my interest in conveying Cory's (and by proxy, *my*) fatigue with *everything*. Because though Cory can see racism, sexism, and classism in the functions of society, these aren't separate issues flashing like neon lights in the setting. Cory can see the way these things play out subtly in the world around xem, and how there are deep, deep structural problems not just in the framework of xir world but in the interior of human minds that cause everything Cory finds despicable. It's so much all at once, and it's too much for Cory as one person to combat and thus change the world, or save the world (as are often the tag lines for adventure fantasies). Cory knows there is nothing one person can do to fix everything that is wrong, if for no other reason than not everyone *realizes* what all is wrong, or *agrees on* what all is wrong. And living like that is both exhausting and enraging. It grates on you constantly, and you feel like you'll never escape it, you'll never feel relief, and you'll never be happy.

It feels that extreme for Cory because xe is so isolated and has so few outlets for fun and pleasure, and I wanted to show that by contrasting Cory with Aki and Zoe, who are just as aware as xe is of all the problems plaguing society, but who also have communities and activities that can bring them happiness and fulfillment. I also wanted to show a contrast between Cory *before* meeting Ae and Cory *after* meeting Ae. Cory *before* meeting Ae is alone and lonely, which exacerbates xir irritation. Cory *after* meeting Ae feels companionship and a deep, profound intimacy, and that enriches xem in a unique way.

Cory is the part of me—and the kind of aromantic asexual—who desires companionship, but I wanted to make sure that readers understand not every aroace desires such a relation. Vio, another agender aromantic asexual, is perfectly content having no partner, and even though he has friends like Ae, Cory, Zoe, and Aki who can understand him, that doesn't awaken a need for partnership like what Cory and Ae or Zoe and Aki have. Some aces/aros/aroaces are non-partnering, some even identify as “loveless”, and I wanted to respect that with a character like Vio.

As the summary I provided might suggest, the story is more about the characters and less about a strong, driving plot. A lot of the “conflict” comes from the mismatch between how Cory and Vio feel about themselves (because of their being agender, aromantic, and asexual) and how other people—whether individually or society at large—sees them.

The main character is Cory, a seventeen-year-old who doesn't consider xemself to be a boy or any gender at all. In the narrative parts of the story, I use “xe/xir/xem” pronouns to represent that agender identity, but since the story takes place in the mid-90s and neo-pronouns like “xe” aren't around yet, I use “they/their/them” pronouns in dialogue whenever someone wants to talk about Cory in a gender-neutral way, and then “he/his/him” pronouns when someone talks about xem using xir assigned gender.

I chose the “xe” pronoun for Cory because the “x” feels like the way Cory rejects (crosses out) the gender xe was given. The pronunciation of the x in these pronouns can be either a “z” sound or a voiced “sh” sound, as in the word “measure”; both are correct. “Xe” can thus be either “zee” or “zhee” (rhyming with “he” and “she”); “xir” can be either “zir” or “zhir” (rhyming with “sir”); and “xem” can be either “zem” or “zhem” (rhyming with “them”).

Another main character is Ae, who is a non-human being that comes to Earth and meets Cory. Because Ae is from outside human constructs of sex and gender, e has no gender identity either. But because Ae does not have an assigned gender to reject, for Ae, I chose “e/eir/em” pronouns to show there is a blank rather than something to be crossed out. These pronouns appear in the narrative parts while “they/their/them” pronouns appear in gender-neutral dialogue. Ae is visually androgynous, so some characters might refer to em as “he” and others “she”. The “e/eir/em” pronouns are pronounced “ee” (rhymes with “he” and “she”), “air” (rhymes with “their”) and “em” (rhymes with the letter “m” and “them”).

[ xe=subject | xem(self)=object | xir=adjective | xirs=noun ]

[ e=subject | em(self)=object | eir=adjective | eirs=noun ]

[ he=subject | him(self)=object | his=adjective | his=noun ]

Vio is another character who also considers himself outside of gender, but because he doesn’t really prioritize it much, he doesn’t mind being called “he”, so “he/his/him” pronouns are used throughout for Vio. Along with Cory’s discomfort with gendered pronouns, I wanted to represent the kind of agender person who doesn’t make pronouns a priority in their gender identity.

I present the pronouns in the story without much commentary at first because that is how it works in real life (or at least that is my experience interacting with people who use neo-pronouns online). You don’t know why a person chose the pronouns they did, you just know

that's what they use when you hear other people talking about them. And there are still neo-pronouns I haven't seen before, so when I'm reading a passage and encounter a pronoun I don't know, I have to just figure out by context what it is (subject, adjective, or object), and generally speaking, it's pretty easy to figure out because of sentence structure. So I wanted to make the experience in my story similar, where the pronouns were simply used and readers have to figure out from the context what the pronouns are.

Then I have two graduate students, Aki and Zoe, who are in an intimate relationship that is never labeled romantic or sexual, but does have sensual aspects to it (like kissing). They are a kind of contrast to Cory and Ae, who also have an intimate relationship that is neither romantic nor sexual, but is also not very sensual. Vio is non-partnering and touch-averse, so he is happy having close friends that feel like family without forming a partnership. Having all three of these is important to me because I want to show at least some variety of how asexual people can form close relationships.

The story revolves around Cory wanting to find a way to evolve out of xir physical humanity, both because xe doesn't like the human body as a physical object, and because xe doesn't like how uncomfortable it is living in current human society. Cory wants to be like Ae, who isn't bound to a physical body and is free to leave Earth whenever e wants. Cory has never had any friends before meeting Ae and xe has a very distant relationship with xir parents, so xe doesn't feel connected to the world at all and wants to get out. But at first neither xe nor Ae knows if it will be possible for xem to evolve into a being like Ae, which causes a lot of frustration as xe continues to interact with people who don't understand xir feelings on things like gender and society. The more people want to box xem into being a "man", the more xe wants to break away from being human entirely.

In the meantime, xe is also the lead singer of a band with some guys in their early twenties. Xe has only been with them for a few months, but before that xe spent xir time alone making xir own music because music was the only part of living that felt good. I made this a major feature not because I'm a musician, but because music is an important part of my emotional experiences. I can't imagine being intimate with someone who doesn't share my music tastes, so I made it a fundamental element in the way Cory and Ae relate to each other and the world.

And finally, it was important to me to make sure that the way I represented agender/aromantic/asexual experience made it clear that being these things doesn't make someone not human. I didn't want to reinforce the idea that romantic and sexual attraction are inherent parts of being human, which can happen when a token asexual or aromantic character turns out to be not human (a robot or AI, or an alien, or something else). The only thing that defines a human is human DNA. There is no universal, defining human experience, and I am always annoyed when people try to sound philosophical by coming up with one. So I tried to be clear that the things that make Cory feel "different" aren't actually things that preclude xem from being a human being. The only thing that defines Cory out of being human is when xe is finally able to undo xir human body live without it. There doesn't have to be any more "meaning" to being human than that.

### *Response*

After my two committee chairs read the story, they provided me with feedback, some of which I will respond to here.

One reader commented that some of the dialogue seems to be "circular" or repetitive, and suggested doing some revision to fix that. However, that quality in my dialogue is purposeful. Conversations in real life can be circular, and the same conversations can happen over and over.

So while some readers may want or at least expect a more polished and pointed style of dialogue, my approach to dialogue is to prioritize a sense of reality. I want the dialogue I write to sound natural to my ears when I say it out loud, complete with fillers and the way they bring up the same subject in multiple conversations. I don't want the dialogue to be so polished that it comes across as artificial and contrived.

I also received the suggestion of removing the character Vio from the story. For reasons I have given earlier, removing Vio isn't something I can reasonably consider. Vio's presence is important to me as he provides a diversity of representation. Vio's version of asexuality, aromanticism, and agenderness contrasts with those of Cory and Ae, which I hope conveys the idea that not all "triple As" are the same. Two people's experience of being asexual-aromantic-agender can be different, and they can have different relationships with their identities, present in different ways, and desire different things.

I also want to make the point that asexuality, aromanticism, and agenderness are not inherently tied to neurodivergence. Cory is "neurotypical" but xe still experiences a complete lack of sexual drive, desire, and attraction, a complete lack of romantic desire and attraction, and a complete lack of gender identity. Vio, on the other hand, is autistic, and his neurodivergence affects his experience of lacking sexuality, romantic attraction, and gender identity. It is commonly thought that anyone who is asexual, aromantic, or agender has some kind of neurodivergence which *causes* that "a-ness", but this is a misconception. While neurodivergence *can* be a cause, it can also exist alongside a-ness without being the cause. In that case, it could simply have an effect on the way someone experiences that a-ness. In any case, a person's a-ness is no less real, and I want to make that clear by having both Cory and Vio in the story and their experiences of their identities and selves given validity.

Another suggestion I received was in regards to narrative tension, specifically, Cory's desire to escape Earth and humanity. The suggestion was that perhaps I could include some kind of incentive that arrives unexpectedly that makes Cory reconsider his readiness to leave everything. I wasn't convinced by this idea. Cory is the part of me that finds being human a nuisance, and nothing the story could offer would be more appealing than breaking out of humanity. To go back to an earlier point, the idea of there being a choice between staying human and leaving reminds me of the trope I despise so much where a human character starts preaching to a non-human character about how beautiful it is to be human.

There are plenty of other stories out there for people who find that kind of choice interesting, but personally I find it incomprehensible. There is no competition between being human and being supernatural, and stories where that choice is treated as a main point of conflict feels like an author making humanist propaganda, trying to convince readers that being human is great actually, and basically trying to make us feel better for something we have no choice in. Because in real life, there is no escape, except for death. We are stuck being human in human society. No fantasy world is out there for us to find, no fantasy characters are on their way to save us. We are human and will always be human. And so some authors write stories to present a false comparison between being human versus being something else to show that being human is *good*, and we should be happy to be human, and that even if we had to choose to be something else we should still choose to be human, and they present so many arguments to make this case, for example that because humans die it makes our short lives more beautiful. I find all such arguments unconvincing, and in fact, offensive. It always feels like the author is being condescending and trying to make readers feel *guilty* for ever having hated being human. And I find that despicable. For many of us, being human is unpleasant, for any of various reasons, and to be preached to by a fantasy author creates a special kind of spite.

I would also say that, to me, I find Ae's choice (and eir thought process behind the choice) to be the more compelling one. The way Ae thinks about erasing humanity or not is much more consequential and interesting to me than artificially forcing a dilemma onto Cory when it is obvious to me that xe (and I) would jump at the chance to escape being human, without hesitation. The part where Ae starts to think about exerting eir will on humans gets into the concept of moral consideration and to the heart of how we decide right and wrong. With Ae, everything has always deserved moral consideration—that is, respect for the other's autonomy—even humans. But then humans displayed the ability to treat others without moral consideration, and so the response is, does that immorality create a strong enough reason for others to decide they are not worthy of existing alongside other life, which they can harm, or can they be made worthy of their existence? This is something I could have expanded on a lot more, but I wanted to keep it concise, otherwise it would have become a philosophy dissertation.

The most interesting feedback I received was a reader interpreting the ending as a kind of fascist takeover by Zoe and Aki. I admit, I have struggled to understand this, since I think I made it pretty clear what Zoe and Aki did. And maybe the comment was given as hyperbole, but even so, I'm not sure how "rewiring" all humans to share the same fundamental value of respect for and value of life translates into violent, totalitarian, political government regime. To me, the ability to rewrite the values all humans hold is the only way to *eradicate* and *prevent* fascism, because it will instill in people a natural inclination to respect the free will of others *along with* the humility to limit their own actions in a way that allows for others to exercise their free will.

Zoe and Aki do not become authoritarian rulers over humans. They don't even make all humans think the same way. They just instill in everyone a basic, fundamental to desire for people to be healthy, free, and happy to the greatest possible extent, without prejudice. There will be different ways to accomplish this that people can still debate and discuss, but such

discussions will not be clouded by ulterior motives such as profit and bigotry, as is the case now. They will be based on real practicality and a shared, genuine desire for truth. This sounds idealistic, but that is the point: by setting the stage for an ideal world, I want to open up new possibilities that fiction can explore that are currently closed off because utopia is considered boring.

Such value-revision is not even possibly anyway, so I don't feel a fear that portraying this will have real-world consequences. I don't believe I am inspiring some future mad scientist to invent mass brainwashing in order to bring utopia to fruition. I am portraying a scene which is purely fantastic and that I think leads to interesting thought experiments, which is, of course, the purview of fantasy and science fiction. Zoe and Aki do not set themselves up as god-emperors over the earth. They are no more known in the utopia they have made possible than they were before. They made one major change and have since let things play out on their own. And they didn't threaten, force, or kill anyone in this process. No one had to comply with any political party or leader. If anything, Zoe and Aki performed a kind of "change of heart" surgery, because they believed that was all that was needed for humanity to be able to thrive. They did the work of a psychiatrist and doctor, which they have always wanted to do, healing humans of the flaw that has incapacitated them for so long. I am genuinely confused if anyone can come away from that thinking this is a form of fascism.

I want to be clear that the reason I made this what happened is to show what I think is the *problem*, not propose a solution. I do think the main problem humanity faces is the fact that so many people do not have a fundamental driving desire to see everyone's needs met and freedoms protected. Even many liberal people who want to "make the world a better place" are limited by their own imagination because they can't imagine a world without capitalism or other norms. If it were possible to remove those limits so that people no longer felt like norms were too big to be

broken, since norms are only maintained by the people who follow them, and if they broke from those norms with the intention of combating social structures that cause harm and limit people's freedoms, and if people would no longer feel a desire to use their individual freedom to cause harm, then that would be the true revolution that would change humanity into a thriving and beneficial species on the planet.

I don't think the real solution is a magical rewiring of people's hearts. I don't think there is *any* solution because people can be stubborn, selfish, and callous, and there's no fixing that. And I am not proposing that the solution is mass genocide of humans I think are "bad" or "wrong". I am only pointing out that this is the problem as I see it, and with no real-world solution, humanity is doomed to continue struggling with stupid and completely unnecessary problems that it creates for itself, and I just find that really exhausting to think about. I'm mad because of the enormous amount of harm humans cause, and I'm exasperated when it feels like I should be able to point out the problems and have that be enough to make change happen. It feels like it should be that easy, and the fact that it's not is demoralizing. And for my story, I just wanted the opportunity to have the solution be as easy as I think it could be if people would just cooperate, because I think we all deserve to feel that relief at least for a moment, as a vacation from the ridiculous real world we have to live in.

Let me point out a scene from another book that shows how I usually see this theme being handled. It comes from Shveta Thakrar's *Star Daughter*:

"They threw you out of the orphanage?" [. . .]

Charumati spoke fiercely, her flickering eyes like living jewels. "See? If we raised humanity to its highest potential, no one would behave like this. No one would be harming you or anyone else, my daughter."

“Mortals do not understand,” Kaushal said. “They walk around blindfolded, thinking only of themselves. Some understand compassion, but they are few and far between.” [. . .] (320)

“When you take your circlet tonight, beti,” Charumati said, “you will join our house, and we will work together to enlighten humanity [. . .]” (321)

*There, she [Sheetal] wanted to tell her mother and her grandmother and Beena and Rati and the entire starry court. You want to understand humans? This is what makes us—and art—what we are. That choice to keep getting back up and trying again in the face of suffering and injustice and despair.*

Would she lose that when she became a full star? [. . .] (374)

“Dev,” she [Sheetal] whispered, knowing it was a risk, “what if we could fix Jeet? Make him better? Would you want me to try?”

Jeet laughed cynically. “You think *you* know what better is?”

Even when they’d fought, Dev had never looked at her like this, like she was her own evil twin. “You mean, mess with him like Rati did? Hard pass.”

“No, I mean, enlighten him. Inspire him to be better.”

“How is that any different?” Dev challenged. “No, seriously. Would you decide one day you needed to fix me, too?”

The air went out of Sheetal. She’d forgotten her mother meant all the imperfect mortals on Earth, which of course meant every single person in existence, good or not.

If they inspired all mortal’s choices, no one would ever make a mistake or have a moment of doubt. That sounded beautiful, but . . . (394)

[. . .]

Even Minal was staring at Sheetal like she didn't recognize her. "Listed to yourself! Three days here, and you're talking about mind control?"

Put like that, the whole thing sounded so unbelievably ridiculous. So self-important.

Sheetal's heart cracked. No. Absolutely not. It *wasn't* any different from Rati's games. Charumati had made it sound noble, but it was only a different version of pulling strings. They'd be turning mortals into puppets [. . .]

"You can't *enlighten* us, Sheetu. That's not how it works."

Dev ran a hand over his face. "How can you even ask that?" (395)

[. . .]

"We can't take people's mistakes away from them." [Sheetal says to her mom]

Any more than anyone could take hers. People had to grow on their own, make their own decisions, good and bad. It was those mistakes and the choice or refusal to learn from them that gave like—and art—their texture, their meaning. It had to be a choice. (396)

Though I didn't read this novel until well after I had written my own, this is exactly the kind of narrative I want to position myself against. I have no patience for these kinds of arguments, where someone (usually a villain, because the idea of fixing humans always has to be framed as *wrong*) wants to improve humans by changing something about humans or human nature, and the protagonists, who are humans who would benefit from this change, get offended. They confront the villain with this weak speech about how it's wrong to change humans because they should get to decide to keep making bad decisions, even when those bad decisions have harmful consequences for other humans, animals, and the environment, and how dare anyone try

to take that right away from them. And there's usually some unwarranted hope sprinkled in, as is here, where the humans insist that *eventually* humans will get it right and become better on their own and in their own time.

Again, I have zero patience for this. Humans have been causing harm for thousands and thousands of years, and now we are here in the year 2021 seeing how close we are to utter chaos and devastation because of how we live our lives. I would feel zero moral qualms about fixing this by changing the part of humans that leads to them making the kinds of harmful choices that got us here.

With my ending, I also wanted to show that a good, peaceful setting doesn't have to be a boring utopia. People are *scared* of utopia because they think that means there's never any conflict ever. But even in a society that actively maintains justice and wellbeing for its members, there will be interpersonal conflict, because justice doesn't mean everyone is the same, it just means everyone's needs are taken care of and guaranteed, allowing them to be more free in their individuality. By not being afraid to engage with utopia, we can explore possibilities so far precluded from our imagination. If we imagine a world where everyone can exist to the best of their ability, it opens up new possibilities for how people can relate to each other, including conflicts. We have to expand our imagination to visualize scenes that don't involve violence and injustice because those are crutches used too often to create conflict in stories, and it's tiresome.

Even in a world where everyone shares fundamental values of respect for life and freedom, including that of non-human animals and the environment, there can be differences in personalities, interests, life goals, and taste. Not everyone will be friends, not everyone will get along, but what will that look like when it doesn't occur to conflicting parties to degrade and violate each other? If someone's knee-jerk reaction is to think that would still be boring, I contend that that someone has not given it enough thought and is not working their imagination

enough. For me, my ending is a doorway to a new world of possibilities that I tend to explore in my private fiction, and while I could have written a story here already taking advantage of those possibilities, for my purposes in this project, I felt like it would be more appropriate to present that door, so that readers could see my thought process play out.

Lastly, I think the most thought-provoking feedback I received was a reader suggesting that I consider adding in something that gives Vio a chance to stand up for himself, since without it, he could be seen as a kind of victim that needs saving. That struck me as a reasonable idea, so I thought about it, and as I re-read my story I kept thinking and wondering what I might do. And I struggled to come up with something because to me, my sense of Vio is that his mother is the only person he is truly *afraid* of, and the debilitating anxiety she causes in him mixed with his nonviolent personality he probably wouldn't be able to work up the nerve to face her himself.

And I wanted the scene of Ae "saving" him from her to not depict any sense of shame. I didn't want to create a sense that Vio being protected was a sign of weakness on his part. Rather, I wanted to show that it's ok if you need to rely on someone else to do what you can't, and there's no reason to feel embarrassed or ashamed by it, and the person who helps you has no reason to think less of you for it.

On the other hand, when I think of Vio, I think of how he doesn't try to change himself to fit in. He gets told how weird he is, and is treated like an outsider by most, but he doesn't try to be a different person because of it. He has social anxiety, but he lives with it rather than trying to change himself to make others accept him. And I think that shows a kind of inner strength that I really value. He may not be confrontational the way Cory and Zoe are, but he is at least secure enough with himself to not follow social pressures. In my mind, I wouldn't go so far as to say that Zoe and Aki "save" him by being his friends, because he wasn't weak for not having any.

His choice to be himself even when it meant not having friends was a strength, and Zoe and Aki just happened to be people he could become friends with as himself.

So as I was editing, I had all these things in mind, and most of the edits I made had to do with massaging portions of narrative and dialogue that I thought could be clearer or have a better sound quality to them. It had been months since I last looked at any of the chapters, and that distance gave me fresh eyes to read with, so it was easier for me to notice when a section didn't quite make sense or wasn't as smoothly phrased as it could be. But for the most part, the overall story and its structure still felt right to me. One commenter had told me that when making a story, you want the conclusion to feel inevitable looking back, even if along the way it wasn't what you would have expected. For me, given the characters' dispositions and desires, the ending does feel like it is what was supposed to happen. It was the ending I had been aiming toward when I started, and it still feels like the right ending now.

I'm grateful to have had the chance to write this story. I don't think I would have ever written it outside this context, and I hope I was able to successfully convey my feelings as a human experiencing the world. After this, I will be returning to my usual work, in which all of my storyworlds by default have no sex—either the biology or the act—and no concept of gender and are full of vampires, demons, and various kinds of magic.

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## APPENDIX I – ORIGINAL PROSPECTUS

Queerly Magical Worlds, Heavens, Hells:

A Prospectus for my Dissertation on N. K. Jemisin

Trying to define “fantasy” has turned out to be a rather difficult and contentious task, despite a number of attempts being made at least since George MacDonald in the nineteenth century. Excluding Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, in general, it is accepted that fantasy involves some sort of impossibility, something that does not exist in the real world, but beyond that trying to detail specifics gets into debated territory. It also doesn’t help that the very concept of “genre” is also nebulous and contested. I tend to side with John Frow in the opinion that genres are *not* a collection of texts, nor are they a list of features; rather, genre is an interpretive process in that the genre identity a text carries sets up expectations that shape the way a reader engages with and interprets it. In that sense, each genre “category” is actually a “lens” much in the same way we consider other interpretive frameworks to be “lenses,” such as feminism, critical race theory, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and so on: each of the “lenses” changes the primary questions we ask and the main subjects we look for when reading a text. The same is true of the genre categories: whether we are reading a fantasy, romance, comedy, horror, or dramatic text changes what we are primed to pay attention to and the questions we ask. As Brian Attebery says in his 2014 *Stories About Stories*, it is less interesting to ask what genre a text *is* than to ask, what happens when we read a text *as* a certain genre? What new things do we see when we have in the forefront of our minds different generic vocabularies and contexts to situate the text in and to form different connections with? (38)

Thus, my approach is to see genres as *elements* rather than *categories*: a text can have elements of fantasy, just as it can have elements of romance, mystery, adventure, and so on, without needing to be defined only or primarily as one genre category, just as any text can be read

through the lens of any interpretive framework. All the genre elements are valid, and each element has its own vocabulary to draw on and its own history into which the subject text fits contextually, and focusing on any one element can lead to different insights about the text—in its own internal construction, in its generic context, and in its social context.

As for fantasy itself, the expectations it sets up for readers stem from that expectation of encountering objects and actions that defy what is actually, physically possible in reality. George MacDonald, in 1864, described fantasy fiction—the word he used was “fairytales”—as a world created by the author/artist that adheres to its *own* laws and logic while differing from what forms and laws exist in nature, whether they are the product of Imagination (embodiments of old truths) or Fancy (mere inventions). J. R. R. Tolkien later in 1939 described a “fairy-story” as “one which touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy” (also suggesting that fantasy is only one element of many). The “Faerie” he mentions “may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician. There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away.” Fantasy, then, takes its impossibilities seriously. More to the point, he describes “Fantasy” as “images of things that are not only ‘not actually present,’ but which are indeed not to be found in our primary world at all, or are generally believed not to be found there,” and his opinion of such creation makes Fantasy “not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent.”

Thirty-six years later, three more definitions of fantasy came out. Colin Manlove in 1975 defined it as “a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least

partly familiar terms” (1). William Irwin said in 1976, “a fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into ‘fact’ itself” (4). He further added, “Whatever the material, extravagant or seemingly commonplace, a narrative is a fantasy if it presents a persuasive establishment and development of an impossibility, an arbitrary construct of the mind with all under the control of logic and rhetoric.” (9). That same year, Eric Rabkin made the simple assertion that “[t]he fantastic is a direct reversal of narrative ground rules” (12).

Most recently, in 2014, Brian Attebery made the summative statement that “the one characteristic shared by all fantasy narratives is their nonfactuality. The fundamental premise of fantasy is that the things it tells not only did not happen but *could* not have happened. In that literal untruth is freedom to tell many symbolic truths without forcing a choice among them” (4), and like Rabkin made the simple assertion that fantasy is “creative and disruptive play with representation of the real world” (32). But beyond this common thread running through each definition—that fantasy deviates from what is known to be possible in reality—there are still many gray areas, but that had not prevented the field of fantasy studies from proliferating.

It is generally accepted that fantasy fiction scholarship began with Tolkien, particularly with his essay/lecture “On Fairy Stories” delivered in 1939 at the University of St. Andrews. Early on, those engaged in the study of fantasy as a genre felt it necessary to defend the subject as worthy of critical inquiry and analysis, but in the last twenty years such defensiveness has died down, in part due to the establishment of the field, to the overwhelming cultural popularity of fantasy, and to the general growing idea within the humanities that anything is or can be an acceptable subject—that in fact we are being remiss if we preemptively dismiss something as a potential subject just because on the surface it doesn’t seem “scholarly enough.”

Because in fact, scholars have proven themselves to be insightful and critical, able to draw on and apply methods and foci from other fields. For example, Marleen Barr, Katherine Weese, Thelma Shinn, Charlotte Spivak, Lori Campbell, and Brian Attebery have used feminist and gender lenses to study fantasy narratives and characters; Phyllis Betz and Christopher Lewis have studied queer narratives in fantasy; Helen Young, Gregory Hampton, Jacqueline De Weever, Thaler Ingrid, and Susana Morris have brought race to the forefront of their investigations, whether analyzing the construct race itself or focusing on the work of non-white authors; J'annine Jobling, Marek Oziewicz, Cath Filmer-Davies, and Sylvia Kelso have focused on religion and spirituality in fantasy; while some like Gary Wolfe have used fantasy as a means to discuss genre theory, Mark Wolf to discuss multimedia and multiauthor world-building in pop culture, and others like Farah Mendlesohn and Susan Mandala have focused on language—rhetoric and linguistics respectfully. Such work adds new directions and layers to fantasy studies, making it a wide, eclectic field full of potential and possibilities.

Work such as theirs show that fantasy texts interact with their social and political surroundings, either by incorporating and representing power structures and dynamics that do exist in the primary world or by challenging those norms—not just by incorporating magical impossibilities but by deviating from expectations and norms around gender, sexuality, race, religion, class, and so on. Producers of fantasy texts, then, like any kind of artist, can be artful, creative, and socially engaged, and similarly, audience members can also be critical and aware of the messages and impacts their media have on the society around them. Minority readers especially are attuned to the messages implied by the lack of/limited representation of characters like themselves in the media they consume, and they discuss it in such outlets as Tumblr, Women Write About Comics, The Mary Sue, BuzzFeed, and in recent Lightspeed Magazine projects like “Women—”, “Queers—”, and “People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction.” They

argue that representation matters, even in entertainment media that supposedly presents impossible and unreal stories, because even though it is fiction, the norms embedded in the narratives and character representations both reflect values in the creators and consumers and reinforce the validity of those norms, and thus help perpetuate erasure of and violence toward minorities, which especially stings when it occurs in a genre that is supposed to be the wellspring of creative deviation from reality.

So then, there are many choices authors have when deciding what *kinds* of deviations to make in their fantasy work, and those choices matter: the kinds of norms embedded in the worlds and narratives send a message about who is allowed or expected to be a leader or a follower; a main protagonist or a side character; an active, independent person or someone meant to die for the main character's development; or even to be loved and desired or to be a colleague or friend pushed aside whenever the romantic partner enters the picture. Members of minority groups have been, and still are, lamenting the poor state of their representation and describing the effect it has on their self-esteem and sense of self, and are still often met with dismissive comments about their being "too sensitive" and "reading too much into" the stories because it's "just fiction" after all, they shouldn't take it too seriously. But such comments seem to come from those who are already well represented in the media they consume and so don't understand what it is like to feel like you do not belong, like you are being actively excluded or mistreated in the media you are drawn to.

I am convicted as a scholar, consumer, and citizen to take the initiative to seek out and listen to voices not automatically granted the privilege of being heard. Many of us white people wonder what the best or "right" way for us to help push society towards equal value of and respect for all people is: how do we use our privileged position to promote and support those who are disadvantaged? Since I am a white woman, my voice and experiences cannot replace

those of women of color, but I also know that that does not exempt me from participating in the conversations and struggles. I cannot just leave it to those who are personally entangled in oppression to fight against it. Just because I am a white woman does not mean I have no business reading, studying, or promoting works by authors of other colors, nationalities, genders, and/or sexual identities. We literary scholars take it as a given that literature and fiction give us insight into the experiences of the characters and allow us to empathize with them and learn about people in similar circumstances. That is not to say that literature or any single work of fiction can replace interacting with real people, but it provides more opportunity for empathy than isolating yourself and only interacting with your own small circle of like-minded and similarly identified acquaintances. I am interested in and seek out fiction—particularly fantasy fiction—by authors who are not white or male or straight because they deserve to be read just as much as what is easy to find on the bookshelves, and because we as readers should *want* to see diverse leading characters rather than be satisfied with an abundance of characters that all fit within a select few types. Until diversity is handed to us the way the usual norm that we have now is, we should feel cheated rather than comfortable and complacent with characters and worlds and narratives that are all too familiar, all too like the real-life privileged.

Besides my privileged position as a white woman (my race and gender combination), my own relationship with fiction—whether designated queer or not—is also affected by my own brand of queerness: asexuality. I am one of the few (it seems) in the world who is actually repulsed by sex, though when it comes to romance I am neutrally aromantic: I don't need or even necessarily want it for myself, but I can enjoy it vicariously when it is going well for others. The main issues for asexual and aromantic representation in *any* genre are 1) actually having any, 2) having representation that doesn't involve being cold, heartless, naïve, robotic, and/or villainous, and 3) not being “cured” by finding “the one” who awakens the sexual and romantic

desire that was apparently just lying dormant until that point. The struggles I and other asexuals/aromantics have when it comes to representation and (not) being able to identify with characters in fiction are not exactly the same as those of other queer/nonhetero people, but I can empathize with the same general feeling that you and your experiences are absent in the stories you love and the frustration of watching those stories that start off with plot and character potential devolve as they go along. Even though I personally am not interested in who has sex with whom (I skip over any sex scenes I encounter) I appreciate how important equal, positive, diverse representation is when it comes to sexuality, and by extension, race and other general identity categories.

My aim with this project is to focus on the fantasy world-building of minority authors, detailing the kinds of norms embedded in the secondary worlds being created, the representations of different identities, and the implied messages and values of those norms, representations, and narratives when considered in context of the primary world.

One of the newest esteemed epic fantasy fiction authors, N. K. Jemisin, is breaking new ground when it comes to the worlds she is creating, especially considering her social identity. As a black woman, she discusses in her personal writing and in interviews about the climate in fantasy fiction publishing and audiences around race, gender, and sexuality as she and others have experienced it—and are still experiencing it. It seems to be common to hear from people of color that when they read fantasy and/or science fiction (FSF) works when they were younger, they felt detached from it because they didn't see anyone like themselves in it (the characters were all white, heterosexual, and often male), or for some, they noticed the lack of diversity and because of their attraction to the possibilities of FSF began to imagine what they were reading differently or to write their own FSF works with more diverse characters. This effort is incredibly important if FSF is to reach its full potential, both as a space for creativity and as a

means for making social commentary. My goal here is to use my dissertation as an in-depth study of Jemisin's work not just for the way she writes a diverse cast of characters but looking at the greater world-building she does to create a narrative space for that cast. In a broad sense, I would say that her work "queers" the stereotypical fantasy work by deviating from a population that is white, heterosexual, and mostly male, which she does in part by creating new fantasy worlds that run with their own mix of norms regarding race, gender, sexuality, depending on the nation under discussion. And beyond that, she also creates her fantasy worlds with their own religions—with power dynamics, politics, and norms stemming from those. Because religion in literature and theology are areas of interest for me, I specifically aim to examine religious and theological implications of the way she queers race, gender, sexuality, and religion itself in the fantasy worlds she builds.

I will start off by clarifying that I will be treating Jemisin's works as *fantasy* rather than *science fiction* (or a mix of both). My operational definition of fantasy is based on the presence of something that is, as far as we know, impossible, which is understood to be *fundamentally* impossible in the primary world (as opposed to potentially possible through technological developments and new scientific discoveries) and which is not given an explanation based on technological development or scientific discoveries within the story world.

The impossibilities of fantasy that are of interest to me come from "magic" in the sense of powers and abilities beyond what is possible in the real/primary world, such as shapeshifting, casting spells, potion-making, manipulation of time and nature and matter, etc., all without the aid of "technology," by which I mean an external, human-created medium. With magic, the power and ability comes from inside the person themselves, not from objects built by humans; it is something "organic" or "intrinsic" to the being's nature, whether they were born with it or learned how to draw on a latent human nature (in a zen-like fashion) that anyone is capable of

given the right training. And the power does not necessarily have a logical cause-and-effect relationship: there is no logical reason, as far as we know, why waving a wand and uttering a specific word would cause someone to take control of an object allowing it to levitate or vanish or even die, or why a person would be able to conjure flames or lightning with their hands by willing it in the same manner as willing their limbs to move. In this sense, then, a wand, for example, would not be “technology” because 1) the wand itself is not what makes the wielder “magical,” it is, rather, a conduit for the magic abilities the wielder has inside themselves, and 2) there is no logical cause-and-effect relationship between the way a wand is used and what it is able to do. “Technological” artifacts are made with a specific purpose in mind and knowledge of how it will create the desired effect, usually based on “scientific” knowledge like physics or chemistry, but with a magical artifact there is no “scientific” logic behind it, it simply has a “magical” power.

While there is often some kind of explanation of the difference between science fiction (based on “science” and “technology”) and fantasy (based on “magic” and the “supernatural”) in the opening pages of a scholarly work in the field, in my reading thus far I have not come across much discussion on the nature of “magic” itself in fantasy literature. The catalog of types of supernatural/magic provided in the 1997 *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* might be useful in providing a vocabulary of types of fantasy, similar to how Farah Mendlesohn provided a useful framework and vocabulary for discussing the relationship between the story world and the primary world and gaining insights into the rhetorical purposes and consequences of that relationship. The kinds of questions I am led to ask when considering what *kind* of magic is present in the story world are: What kinds of abilities does it grant? How well known is it in the world? Who has access to this magic? How is magic learned and controlled? What kind of status does magic have and bestow on those who use it? From these content-related questions stem more analytical questions

that I am interested in exploring: What does magic's manifestation add to the "meaning" or "message" of the novel? What difference does choosing a certain kind of magic over another make? What commentary on social power does the use of magic make? What might we learn from comparative studies on the sources of magic in novels and the limitations/natural laws of the magic? I have found a few studies that have touched on these questions, but not nearly as many as I would have expected, and certainly not to the depth of exploring the relation that the magic has to the world-building itself.

Specifically, I am interested in the ways magic is combined with religion, spirituality, and faith and the significance that combination has in the worlds and stories. As of now, Jemisin has three series each set in different fantasy worlds that she has created with their own races and nationalities, politics, classes, gender dynamics, cosmologies, mythologies, religions, and foundational magic/supernatural givens. My guiding questions include: What kind of power/agency does world-building give *her* as an author, and as a black woman in America? What kind of commentary do the similarities and differences between her worlds and our Primary world make regarding the issues of race, gender, sexuality, and religion? How does the magic work with the similarities and differences to make that commentary? What does the magic contribute to the rest of the novel's elements (plot, characters, themes, setting, etc.)? How do her worlds fit into the larger collection of fantasy fiction, black women's fiction, and even more specifically, black women's fantasy fiction? My main framework for tackling these questions will be one built by queer theory(ies) (to be elaborated below).

My current plan is to give each chapter a central issue to focus my analysis of Jemisin's world-building in terms of queering and the (primarily spiritual/theological) implications for and commentary on real-world society. Rather than choosing one issue and exploring it across a mix of authors, I want to stay with one author 1) to provide an example of how one author is using

fantasy world-building to address real world issues, 2) to be better able to go in-depth in my analysis and have a better grasp on a manageable number of primary texts, and 3) to be current, since Jemisin is still very much an active author. My introduction will be dedicated to explaining the background around Jemisin's work—fantasy fiction and its scholarship, definitions of magic and fantasy and my own operational definition, black women's fiction and especially their use of religion and spirituality, religion in literature more broadly, and of course, the queer theory framework I will be using to talk about *how* Jemisin's world-building raises Primary world issues and critiques them.

Chapter 1 will focus specifically on the issue of race. In her worlds, Jemisin creates new nations and races of people to populate them--with both familiar and strange physical traits that mark them as a specific race (or mix). The different races and nations then also have among them hierarchies built on political power, as well as class structures within each nation that contribute to social stratification. While the situation feels familiar (power dynamics based on nation, race, and class is a constant in our Primary world), Jemisin's worlds have their own backstories as to how those dynamics came about and contributing factors to their continued existence, including magic abilities, cosmology, and religious affiliation. Putting Jemisin in conversation with the backdrop of other race analyses of fantasy literature and of other black women authors will provide some points of comparison for my close reading of how Jemisin manages her own races and race relations—in a word, how she uses the creative opportunities in fantasy to “queer” race.

Chapter 2 will focus on gender. Aside from her sexless gods, Jemisin doesn't create new genders in her works, but gender roles and performance play a large role in her plots. There are plenty of fantasy literature gender analyses available to use as comparisons for my own close reading, but as with chapter 1 my focus will be on how Jemisin constructs her fantasy world in order to play with gender. The cosmologies, mythologies, religions, and magic in the worlds all

form the framework that the gender roles and expectations (and related deviances) exist in. What are the ways that her worlds differ from our Primary world and how does that affect the way gender is conceived? What does it suggest about our own Primary-world conceptions of gender?

Chapter 3 will be dedicated to sexuality. Jemisin's *Inheritance* trilogy has the most overt sexual themes running through it due to the aforementioned gods who are responsible for everything in creation through their mating, thus the cosmology of the world is built on a concept of sexuality. Different kinds of beings come into existence based on the classes of beings that mate, and even though the classes live simultaneously (three gods, three types of godlings, humans, demons), there are taboos and preferences with violent histories behind them. There is, of course, more to the worlds and stories: issues of orientation(s), attraction, desire, performance, and relationships within each of Jemisin's three major worlds will provide a lot of material to compare across her own work and against the backdrop of other fantasy works and our Primary world. How does she present sexuality in her worlds? How do the varieties of sexuality fit the frameworks of her created worlds (relating to politics, race, gender, religion, magic, cosmology)? What ideas do her worlds raise regarding sexuality in our Primary world?

In chapter 4 I will take an interest in religion itself, and more broadly the relationship between humans and "higher" beings, whether it be an established organization of belief and personal dedication or a generally accepted understanding of place and power. Jemisin has created worlds and narratives that rely heavily on a foundational relationship of some kind between humans and the beings and/or powers above them that are responsible for the creation of the world and able to manipulate it in some way. The cosmologies and mythologies of cosmological order, the devoted communities and their rituals, the classes and politics that affect daily life for the inhabitants of her worlds come from this aspect of the framework she has created (and as I will have discussed in previous chapters, will affect the ways race, gender, and

sexuality are conceptualized and played out in the worlds). What is the relationship between Jemisin's created religions and the magic in her worlds? How does that relationship queer religious/spiritual ideas? What is the relationship between the religions and the plot? What do the religions add to the worlds (why would she include them in her world-building)? What does her story seem to suggest about religion in general and about particular ways of "doing" religion or religious beliefs?

My conclusion of course will depend on what my research and analyses lead me to, but I expect I will use this space to talk about how this study lays the groundwork for (my) future research on fantasy world-building and magic in fantasy and about what Jemisin's work contributes to fantasy literature in terms of race, gender, and sexuality diversity. If I were to start writing in earnest in August with a regular writing schedule, then it's possible that I would finish chapter drafts (ranging from 35 to 40 pages each) every six to eight weeks, which would lead to a completed draft in one year. Revisions of each chapter might take four weeks, meaning the whole final draft could potentially be complete within eighteen months. Committee approval and oral defense would take place shortly after.

The framework that I intend to use for my analysis is based on queer theory, broadly speaking. Like Fotopoulou, I will be using "queer" not so much to refer to "an identity category in LGBT studies" but as a lens against challenging normativity, a "constant questioning of norms" (25). I will be adopting her idea of "queer" as an "approach to research, a distinct methodological approach that aims to perform an act of 'queering', to de-naturalise taken for granted categories of analysis, even beyond issues of sexuality and gender" (25). Relatedly this approach resists homogeneity: Rather than trying to identify and delineate "*the* experience" of a queer identity, whatever it is or however it is defined (by gender, sexuality, orientation, behavior, social status, etc.) it directs our attention to the *variety* of experiences that the individuals of a

similar queer identity/position/alignment have and how the surrounding atmosphere affects that experience. It avoids leading us to conclude that any queer position necessitates a certain experience shared by all who have a similar identity/position in their own society and instead acknowledges that queerness has an influence/impact depending on the atmosphere, the attitude of the people in the space, and other factors, priorities, and hierarchies in the setting (race, class, religion, education, etc.). So rather than assuming there is a homogenous or common queer experience to extrapolate from the data, this approach is an examination of personal experiences and settings to find the effects of queerness in shaping the experience, i.e., emphasizing the influence of queer status and identity in a given complex position rather than on the resulting experience itself. This method will involve identifying the setting that surrounds the individual that forms the air and space in which they live (though the resulting experience does come into account in order to trace back to the shaping impact of the society that led to that experience). This suits my interest in analyzing the world created in the fantasy stories and exploring the shaping influence the atmospheres have on the characters (and in comparison to the real world), not to identify a “queer experience” for the characters but to explore the commentary these created worlds make on the real world societies in which real-life queer-identified people live.

In Seidman’s words, the aim of queer theorists is to “approach identity in terms of nonsubstantialist notions of affinity, hybridity, and multiplicity while pressing beyond a politic of identity to a critique of the social forces that compel selves and social relations to be organized in sexual identity terms and to be regulated by norms of normality and health” (185). He advocates taking a sociological interest in social forces and the way (and extent to which) cultural codes of what is acceptable or deviant, what is normal or queer, are “structured into official knowledges, laws, social policies, folk mores, institutional cultures, and media representations,” and the effect it has in defining and regulating selves and social relations (186).

Robert Goss says the same thing coming from a theologian's perspective, that queering means to "problematize fixed and hegemonic notions of identity" because "identities are always multiple, hybrid, provisional or composite in which an infinite number of identity markers can combine to form new sites of knowledge" (45). Queer theorists consider queer a "transgressive paradigm," a "resistance to normativity" (45), and for Goss this has theological and hermeneutical implications. The queer paradigm's deconstruction work is "essential" for the "development of new hybrid sexual theologies that free the signifiers from the tyranny of normative signifieds," work that "allows alternative voices and alternative theologies to surface" through transgression of binaries (hetero/homo, gay/lesbian, male/female) and other social categories (47). This kind of transgression, deconstruction, and queering is what I intend to look for when I read Jemisin's work focusing on the way her religions and theologies affect and interact with other aspects of the worlds.

Goss says he specifically uses queer "as a tool of theological deconstruction" (46), and I'd like to read Jemisin with the same goal in mind: how is Jemisin using magic to deconstruct and complicate theological, religious, and spiritual knowledge? If we approach magic, world-building, and fantasy literature as a creative and imaginative act, then Goss's observation that to queer or transgress "is not merely a rebellious act but a Foucauldian liberative action driven by the imagination of alternative possibilities and hopes" (47) applies, allowing us to see Jemisin's fantasy world as an alternative possibility to current Primary world attitudes and practices. We can examine her work to see *how* she is producing an alternative possibility by looking specifically at the way she uses magic, how she weaves it into her world, and the way it affects the dynamics among characters, their social positions, and also the very production of knowledge and power in the world. Goss predicted in 1999 that queer theology would come to encompass all sorts of markers beyond sexuality and gender, examining how "the networks of power

relationships . . . shape race, gender, sexuality ethnicity, religion, class, physical conditions, age and our relationships to the earth” (53). In the same vein, I will be examining the forces in Jemisin’s fantasy worlds that shape race, gender, sexuality, and religion, including magic, theology, and mythology.

My project, then, is similar to Heather Tapley’s analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, but while she uses capitalism as her central focus to tie together queerness, race, gender, and sexuality, I will be putting magic and theology at the center in my analysis of how Jemisin’s fantasy worlds queer race, gender, sexuality, and religion. Like Tapley says of Morrison, Jemisin “works against paradigms of knowledge that have historically reduced the reading of raced subjects to fixed assumptions and essences” (24-25), but instead of doing it through anti-capitalism, Jemisin does it with her magic and fantasy-world-building.

Thelathia “Nikki” Young, in her more recent article from the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, promotes queering as a method for challenging normative interpretations of theology. To queer is to trouble “the lenses through which we read experiences, contexts, and intersections” by bringing the focus to marginality—to marginal identities and experiences—to “dismantle the dynamics of power and privilege” in theology and ethics (127). This method involves deliberately “initiating instability where there is fixity” in both the experiences under discussion and the interpretations of those experiences (129). A major end-goal that Young prioritizes is putting an end to the polarization theologians and ethicists create by setting up what is “right” (dominant) against what is “wrong” (marginal) and to instead “explore subjectivities, experiences, and contexts in relation to one another, knowing that they are unstable all the while” (131). One possible way I see to do this is by finding hybridity, what Goss describes as “interstitial space” that allows for interaction among and “movements between fixed categories” and markers of identity and even “the emergence of new identities” (49). Jemisin

doesn't only create new nations, races, and religions, but hybrids as well, significantly her main characters, which, in line with queering and queer theory, "raises questions about the nature of our social identities as multicultural, multigendered and multisexual" (51). For example, Yeine Darr is a hybrid of the Amn and the Darre races (also of human and god souls); Oree Shoth is a demon, a spawn of a god/ling and a human; Sieh is a godling of mischief, a hybrid of childishness and wisdom beyond human understanding; Hanani is the only female ever in her chosen profession. Her works raise questions about race, gender, and sexuality just by incorporating them into the worlds she builds, but the important role hybridity plays with her characters and plots builds on and complicates those questions. As I identify the specific ways and moments where the worlds Jemisin has built queer Primary world conceptions, hybridity in the worlds and the narratives will provide insightful points to explore.

Thomas Bohache provides an interesting example of how to do queer hermeneutics in order to find empowerment for queer (marginalized) people by reading Christ/God as queer. By finding ways to see love, support, and an embrace from the very god/entity (and scriptures) that so many followers use to condemn and hate, Bohache reclaims God and Christ for queer people. Because of my interest in the religious, theological, and spiritual implications of Jemisin's fantasy world-building, Bohache's "Embodiment as Incarnation: An Incipient Queer Christology" can serve as a model for doing queer *and* religious literary analysis. I can follow his example to find how Jemisin is writing/creating gods and higher powers that can give a message of empowerment and acceptance to marginalized people, and where she is using her gods, religious characters, scriptures, creation mythology, and magic to confront and challenge normativity, whether based on sexuality, race, and gender (also class and ability).

Another useful guide for my queer-reading framework comes from Emily Drabinski, who applies queer theory to library cataloging systems in her *Library Quarterly* article. Her main

argument is that when library cataloging takes place, the catalogers operate with an ideology that contributes to the way information, knowledge, and meaning are produced; there is no objectivity, and because information, knowledge, and meaning change over time, the catalogs are never correct “once and for all” and are under constant review. Rather than continue the process of correcting classifications, Drabinski proposes queer theory as a method for rethinking classification itself. She describes queer theory as being “root[ed] in disruption of, rather than assimilation to, norms of identity” as well as “in a postmodernism that challenged the idea that truth could be final,” making a political challenge to “stability” and “universality” because both concepts freeze social power and permit claims to Truth (100-101). Queer theory takes a direct interest in “the mechanisms and workings of power” that produce knowledge and the consequential “material social effects” (103). While it would certainly be an interesting project to investigate how black women’s works are catalogued (especially in relation to fantasy and science fiction), the immediate value of her article for me is the emphasis on knowledge formation through categories: I can read Jemisin’s work and look for ways she disrupts normative knowledge formation in the fantasy worlds she builds. She does make worlds that use classifications of race, nationality, gender, religion, being (god, human), profession, and class, but are there ways that she troubles the idea of categorization (with hybridity, for example)? How does she manage marginalized knowledge, experiences, and identities in her worlds and narratives against the dominant? What does she suggest about capital-T-Truth and the notions of objectivity and stability?

In all of this, I do think it’s important (for me) to keep Tace Hedrick’s point in mind, that a queer-reading analysis should avoid making assumptions about the kind or level of resistance to normativity a text will have. While I certainly like Jemisin’s work and think there is a lot going on there that *is* resistant, assuming that *everything* is or must be resistant would be misguided.

Hedrick's own work is a cautionary example of how to be critical, careful, and conscious: She herself does a close reading of writing by Gabriela Mistral and Gloria Anzaldúa, two women whose queerness can be taken for granted so much that the "deeply embedded heteronormative and racialized concepts" that they use goes unanalyzed (69), "eliding the contradictory claims, conservative assumptions, and internal conflicts that can mark even the most progressive of queer texts" (77). The lesson for me is that I will need to be honest in assessing the extent to which Jemisin's worlds queer Primary world concepts and categorizations.

Part of the assessment will come from taking into account the way scenes are crafted—through staging, point of view, tone of descriptions—to invite reader sympathy and identification, to "build our own identification with figures otherwise alien to" the normative scripts (Geller 19). Having a main character—or multiple characters—who queer social order "construct[s] stories that undo" that social order and its underlying assumptions (19), but not only are such characters used to queer normative expectations of gender, race, class, and sexuality, readers are encouraged to be outraged by injustices enacted toward queer and marginal characters. The allusions those scenes and perpetrators make to the familiar violence and injustice based on identity in the Primary world establish the path for readers to make the connection between fantasy and reality, to learn to "despise the people who enact such brutality" (18) and, by extension, the social order and prejudices that feed those people's actions. This of course stems from a long, ongoing discussion about what the greater "purpose" or impact of fantasy (and by extension, *all*) literature is. *So what* if Jemisin or any fantasy author creates worlds and stories that challenge Primary world norms? That's too big a question for me to tackle directly, and with everything that has been written in defense of literature's "purpose" I don't think it's necessary since there seems to be enough to either convince a person or not, with or without my contribution. I also don't want to spend much (or any) time being an apologist for

fantasy literature: the field is established and the presence of fantasy in our media is overwhelmingly popular, therefore I see no need to give haughty skeptics any attention. I'm just as uninterested in them as they are in me.

I find the analyses in *Millennial Mythmaking* (2010), *Portals of Power* (2010), and *Girls Transforming* (2013) rather inspiring as well. Like Tapley, each work has a grounding theme that the authors use to guide their readings of their chosen selections (none of these is a single-author study). The first traces the hero quest of the main (female) protagonists and identifies the feminist reworkings of the traditional (Joseph Campbell's) monomyth. The second is concerned with finding the porter figures, which form the "nexus point and instance of magical agency, the place where one world not only physically borders but also *engages* another," specifically because "the porter connotes a myriad of power associations and imbalances, centralizing and making transparent the ways in which literary fantasy attacks real-world problems" (6). The third discusses how invisibility and age-shifting are used to represent gendered experiences and shows the link between fantastic and Primary world discourses on gender and power. I certainly see these themes (hero quest, porters, transformation) all as possible narrative devices I can highlight to show how Jemisin is queering through fantasy worlds, though not the only ones. Rather than focusing on a particular trope, I am focusing on a single author because my interest is in the multiple, interrelated ways she builds her fantasy worlds and the narratives that take place in them. This could turn out to be the first full-length, in-depth study of Jemisin's novels, and because she is so acclaimed for her Secondary world-building, she seems like an excellent entry point for a discussion on the subject aside from the usual suspect, Tolkien. Which is not to say his work and the massive amount of detail that went into his world-building (and the Primary world critiques behind it) shouldn't be appreciated, only that Jemisin's world-building and

narratives feel fresh but relevant to the issues we (still) face now regarding power dynamics with race, gender, sexuality, and religion.

## APPENDIX II – SECOND PROSPECTUS

After spending the last year reflecting on my goals and interests, and after having conversations with various people both in and out of the department, I have decided to start a new dissertation project. Because I have no interest in pursuing an academic career, I have no compelling reason to produce a more “traditional” dissertation that reflects my scholarly interests in a marketable way to potential university employers. Instead, I see this project as an opportunity to talk about some of the subjects and themes that I have an interest in personally, socially, politically, and academically in a style that is important to me.

I intend to write an original novel, and one reason I am inclined to approach this project creatively is because fiction, for me, feels like a natural way to express thoughts and ideas. And as many literature classes have emphasized, that is, in fact, an important aspect of fiction: to convey ideas, especially in ways that are interesting and fun for the reader (and writer). Since literary scholars spend time combing through fiction to explain the ideas and messages and possibilities it contains, it seems reasonable that we could approach fiction from the other direction. That is, it makes sense to use fiction as a medium for conveying ideas rather than just the source we study to learn about other people’s ideas.

### **Context and Motivations**

Because the way that fantasy deviates from reality with magic has always resonated with me, while stories set in the real world don’t, that is the genre I focus on specifically. I like how fantasy stories can imagine exciting alternatives to our current politics and social structures, which is simultaneously a commentary on current versions. But I especially like how fantasy can create alternatives to reality itself, since I don’t feel comfortable in “real life” and prefer to create worlds where I would feel comfortable. Plenty of fantasy stories create worlds I don’t like or have stories that don’t interest me, but there is a higher probability that I will feel drawn into a story if it is in the fantasy genre.

I have been writing creatively for as long as I can remember, and I write almost every day on one story or another that I have in progress. I do this because I enjoy the act of writing, and also because it gives me the chance to engage with stories that actually interest and feel relevant to me, unlike the bulk of stories created by everyone else, whether on TV, in movies, in music (both lyrics and videos), in books,

or in fanfiction. I get to see characters that I understand and explore issues that matter to me in a way that feels relevant to my own experience, which I will also do for this project. These issues include:

- asexuality (and the ubiquity of sex/sexuality in society)
- aromanticism (and amatonormativity)
- intimacy and forms of intimacy besides romance and sex
- being agender (and an agender view of gender)
- voidpunk, a term recently coined on Tumblr for an aesthetic that embraces the dehumanization that autistics, aromantics, and asexuals often face by questioning the importance of being (considered) human in the first place<sup>1 2 3 4</sup>
- music
- god, mostly from an agnostic view, and a non-religious interest in transcendence

Some of the things I want to discuss are relatively new, in the sense that they are identities that have only recently been given names and public attention and around which communities have only recently begun to emerge. Much of the discussions around these identities is happening in real-time, non-academic spaces, such as forums, blogs, YouTube videos, and comment threads on introductory articles from online magazines.

For example, asexuality. Generally, when people talk about the history of asexuality, the landmark moment is in 2001 when David Jay began the website AVEN (the “Asexual Visibility and Education Network”) so that people could build a community around their asexuality and educate anyone who was interested in the orientation. In academia, asexuality is still an emergent field of study<sup>5</sup>, and most studies come from fields like sociology, biology, medicine, and psychology (some of which I have participated in after seeing the CFPs circulating online). They aim to study the brain chemistry, medical

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<sup>1</sup> <https://arotaro.tumblr.com/post/171677143816/milkchocolateowl-arotaro-can-you-elaborate-more>

<sup>2</sup> <https://arotaro.tumblr.com/post/177643285606/since-voidpunk-seems-to-be-gaining-some-steam>

<sup>3</sup> <https://arotaro.tumblr.com/post/171438656986/techno-trashcan-brinnanaza-dont-let-anyone>

<sup>4</sup> <http://aroarolibrary.tumblr.com/post/180763844744/aroacepagans-sorry-im-just-tagging-you-because>

<sup>5</sup> <https://the-peak.ca/2018/02/sfu-becomes-first-university-to-offer-asexuality-studies/>

history, and physiology of asexuals or collect sociological data about how asexuals experience culture, community, and socialization differently from allosexual people.

These studies are intended, it seems, to “justify” the existence of things like asexuality, aromanticism, and divergent genders, because such identities have a lot of stigma associated with them. So, while I understand that these studies are valuable contributions in the effort to make the public less hateful, uninformed, and oblivious to people who identify with these things, I personally am not incredibly interested in them. I have never felt that I needed anyone else to justify my existence or my identities. I have always known, without a doubt, that I have no sexuality. I have been very open and unapologetic about it even before I knew the term “asexual” (which I found around 2009 in my sophomore year of college). I do not care if people out there don’t “believe” in asexuality or come up with ignorant and hateful reasons to dismiss the concept as a lie or delusion, because I don’t need anyone’s approval to know my own lived experience. (I recognize that I am not the usual case though.)

Participating in some online community spaces feels much more valuable to me.<sup>6</sup> I find the discussions happening in these spaces much more interesting than academic studies because it is *us*, the actual asexuals ourselves, discussing our own personal experiences, feelings about sex (and romance and gender), and our own proposed theoretical constructs that we develop together for understanding social operations that are blatant to us but invisible to “normal” people (like amatonormativity and the “relationship escalator”<sup>7</sup> and issues around consent<sup>8</sup>). These discussions show us the diversity that exists among asexuals while also giving us space to produce language that helps us make sense of our experiences and talk about them better, from both a personal and communal perspective, without having to justify ourselves first.

I could write a dissertation that directly discusses asexual experience and develops some of the theories we use to talk about society from an asexual perspective. I could talk about asexual communities

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<sup>6</sup> And to plenty of others: <https://diskhorsesdudes.tumblr.com/post/179657992090/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://alifeunexamined.wordpress.com/2016/01/31/asexuality-and-the-relationship-escalator/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://starchythoughts.tumblr.com/post/141266238674> (hermeneutical injustice)

themselves, how we circulate messages of simple positivity and validation (for those who do feel like external validation helps them accept their own experience), how we have our internal discussions on asexuality and theory, and how we have to deal with the despised “ace discourse” regarding whether asexuals (and aromantics) are considered part of the LGBTQ+ community or not. (Gatekeepers and exclusionists can be very hostile, but there are also plenty of LGBTQ+ members who adamantly defend the inclusion of aces and aros as LGBTQ+.). I could write about that, but to be honest, I find doing that in the community spaces much more important than trying to present the community to outside readers. That work would have value to it, but it’s not something I feel interested in doing myself. And on top of that, I wouldn’t feel right presenting so many ideas that were developed in the community in a way that makes it feel like I’m trying to take credit for them in some way.

Instead, my interest in this project is contributing to one particular issue that gets raised frequently in practically any minority group, which is the issue of representation. All of my writing always deals in some way with my feelings about being asexual, aromantic, agender, vegan, and/or straight-edge (among other things). I write about what it’s like to be these things in a world that is overwhelmingly *not*, and sometimes I write other worlds where these things are the norm. I do this because this is the only way for me to get the stories I want to experience. I feel blocked from enjoying mainstream entertainment because things that are normalized like sex, romance, gender, alcohol, and meat repulse me and make it nearly impossible to enjoy the story as a whole. I have to write the characters I can relate to and the stories I am not repulsed by because no one else does. So in everything I write, there is always “representation” of these things in one way or another, and I think presenting one piece that I write, with one version of representation, can serve as an example of what is currently missing in mainstream media.

Which is not to say that what pleases and satisfies *me* in terms of representation will please or satisfy every asexual/aromantic/agender person, since there are a lot of diverse experiences and feelings among people with any shared identity—and not just regarding the identity itself but also regarding preferences like genre and character personalities and aesthetic. I do not aim to please *everyone* when I

write. In fact, I have only ever written because it pleases *me* and gives me what *I* want to see in my entertainment media, since I can't find it in what is already available. That is why this project will only be one example of how things like asexuality and aromanticism and agenderness can be represented. I feel like that needs to be stated clearly since there is currently such a lack of representation that it is surely hard for people not immersed in these communities to know that there *is* diversity to represent.<sup>9</sup>

So I think doing this project for an external audience can be part of that larger, ongoing effort to 1) raise awareness of minority issues, 2) provide insight into various experiences that individuals of a social minority have, and 3) give people tools going forward for how to discuss those things in real, daily life. When a reader who has been oblivious to the issues I discuss reads a scene that directly addresses it in fiction, it can seep into their knowledge base and be used to understand a situation where something similar happens in their own real life. They can become aware of things that are happening around them that before have gone unnoticed.

And as for myself, I like the way writing fiction provides an opportunity for me to play out scenarios that can help me plan ahead for real life, or that give me an opportunity for catharsis where I can vent out my frustrations with social norms. Fiction has been my way of practicing possible ways to talk about the things that matter to me (and that few people think about or understand) in a way that has been both therapeutic and has made me feel prepared to talk about asexuality in any real-life situation.

And when I think about how fiction is one way that I practice articulating my thoughts to help me in my personal life, it supports my feeling that fiction is a legitimate way to discuss and present complicated and valuable ideas in a public and even academic setting. I don't actually think that is a controversial statement given that, in this field, we study literature (fiction/creative writing) to find the ideas being discussed and presented within the text.

I see this project as an opportunity for me to share the kinds of fictional spaces that I live in with other people (something I almost never do because these spaces are so personal to me), which seems to be

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<sup>9</sup> <https://jellyfable.weebly.com/book-blog/every-asexual-character-in-2018-ya>

something we value as we seek to learn more about other people's perspectives and life experiences. And as with any writing project, this is also a challenge for me to craft every scene in such a way that it effectively conveys the ideas I am trying to share. This would be true even for a traditional dissertation, where the author's intended meaning in every chapter and every sentence should be clear to the readers, so that goal doesn't change with the format. And because I will continue to write fiction in the future, the opportunity to get feedback on my work in this process could be beneficial to me.

### **Influences**

I grew up reading a lot, but I don't have any conscious awareness of what authors have influenced the way I write. I don't remember ever reading something and thinking to myself, "Aha! I want to write like *that!*" I remember liking or disliking things, but I don't remember that like leading to a conscious interest in replicating anything. When I was in elementary school, my favorite books were those by Garth Nix (*Sabriel, Lirael, Abhorsen, Shade's Children*), but I never tried to mimic anything in the style or plot. I loved the Harry Potter series early on, but I didn't aspire to write like J. K. Rowling. More recently, I enjoyed reading books by Tananarive Due and N. K. Jemisin. Jemisin's Inheritance trilogy were some of the few books I truly enjoyed in a long time. The world and the story drew me in, and I felt a resonance with her style. There were so many lines she wrote that felt like something I might have written. Her sentence flow and word choices and narrative structure all felt familiar to what I had already been doing with my own writing. Which is not to say I would have written the same stories she wrote, but reading her work was like seeing my own writing style on printed page, which felt validating. It made me think that my writing style is good enough to be published, even though I don't actually want to publish anything.

Aside from that, I don't have a good sense of who has influenced my development as a writer, especially since my writing has always been in private. I've always written and edited only to reach my own standards. That's not to say I think I'm a genius fiction writer. I don't expect anything I write to be brilliant, groundbreaking, or radical, and I'm not setting out to write best-sellers or critical literary masterpieces. Actually, I have never wanted to publish a book or become popular. I've only wanted to write for myself. I only ever needed my writing to be something that *I* enjoy, the stories that *I* want to

read and that I can't get anywhere else. Because of that, my writing has always been personal and I've developed my style more-or-less privately to be one that I like.

And I have a clear sense of what I do and don't like. I like a balance of beautiful prose and effective, easy-to-understand description, the kind that almost makes the words invisible because they create such a clear image in your head. When I want a scene to feel like it's playing on a screen, I want to use words and sentence structures that making reading easy so I don't get bogged down in the words themselves.

But when scenes get more meditative or moody, I like prose that has an elegance to it. I don't want it to get too lofty and sound like overblown Romantic poetry, I want it to feel subtle and easy to read because of the flow from word to word, but I also want the words to carry a weight that makes me slow down and feel something. I like beautiful prose when it's time to focus on something significant and I like efficient description when a scene is moving forward with action and visuals. I've read things that try to make every sentence, no matter what context, poetic and lyrical (*The Queens of Innis Lear* comes to mind, as does *Kushiel's Dart*) which makes reading tedious, because even though each line is quite lovely, it feels sluggish. And I've read things where every line is quick and efficient, even minimal, which makes it feel kind of thin. And I've read things where the writing struck me as . . . fine. Not bad overall, but nothing that impressed me (like *Foundryside* and *Six of Crows*). And then some books that were a mix of some very nice sentences and some sentences that made me cringe (like *Strange the Dreamer*).

It's also difficult to say what my influences are because I practically stopped reading for fun years ago when I realized I couldn't connect with a lot of stories or relate to most characters, so rather than basing my writing off of models, I create a style by feeling it out as I go and deciding what I like or don't like on my own. I do occasionally open a new book that has an interesting summary, and as long as it's not first-person narrative or present tense or written in an archaic voice, I'll usually read at least one third before I decide to give up or not. I have given up on a few books in the last two years because something about the writing style or the character dynamics or the plot just wasn't working for me. Sometimes I can be interested in a story without actually liking anything in particular about it, it just somehow has me

hooked to want to know more, sometimes against my will. I think to myself, “I don’t even like this, why do I care? Why am I still reading this?” I don’t like that feeling. It’s impressive for a book to have that kind of power on me as a reader, but it’s not enough of a good quality for me to say a book is good or enjoyable (*Six of Crows* was like this).

As far as I know, only one book (or actually, series, since it was the Harry Potter books) has ever made such an impression on me that it became part of my imaginative playground. I don’t know that I’ve ever read any other book and thought, “I want to make my own version of this!” (whether just as a daydream I keep in my head or as a story I write down) or “I want to write a fanfic of this story where X happens instead, like it *should* have!” I think books for me have pretty much been self-contained experiences where I read them and then move on. But Harry Potter made me want to write a story about myself in Hogwarts, interacting with Harry and Hermione and Snape, so I did. (I didn’t try to write in Rowling’s style though, I just wrote in the style that felt good and natural to me.)

Instead of books, it has been mostly anime that have given me that urgent feeling of, “I need to write this story my own way!” Not that there have been many. I’ve certainly watched much more anime than I’ve been inspired by to write fanfiction. But where only one book has inspired me to write, there have been at least five anime (*Yu-Gi-Oh*, *Yu-Gi-Oh 5Ds*, *Saiyuki*, *Rurouni Kenshin*, *Hunter x Hunter*). But I don’t know of any pattern as to which anime will have that effect and which won’t, because there are some anime I absolutely love but that didn’t make me want to write anything (like *Hellsing Ultimate* and *Shingeki no Kyojin* and the *Fate* series and *Owari no Seraph*).

Similarly, even though I pretty much stopped watching movies years ago, there have also been several movies that inspired me to write stories that were either fanfiction with the same characters and setting or a vaguely similar story with new characters and settings, and there are also movies I love that haven’t inspired me in any imaginative way (like the *Underworld* movies or *Blade*, which is odd considering how obsessed I am with vampires).

I have a kind of love-hate relationship with anime because there are so many tropes that I hate (like female characters being infantilized and sexualized at the same time, characters having cartoonishly

exaggerated personalities, comedy that relies on slapstick or embarrassing situations), but when it's good, it's *good*. When a dramatic scene comes crashing in with epic music and incredible animation that seems to explode out of the screen, or when a tragic scene hits and everything kind of goes quiet and still before it erupts with agony, or when a horror scene drips with such a creepy atmosphere I can't help but curl up in my seat as my skin crawls, I feel something happen in me, and I know that I want to write like *that*. I want to write action scenes that intense and visual. I want to write scenes that gut me and wreck my heart. I want to write death scenes that have just the right pacing that leads you into a hollow depression before a dramatic turn that makes you feel like a character is about to annihilate the whole world with the force of their rage. Ever since I started writing fanfiction in 2003, I've aimed to capture what feels so powerful in anime in my writing style, and so when I write, I write as if I'm animating a scene. I write it from the view of a camera to get the visual description I want, and I try to set a mood with the writing style the way anime does with its music and art. (I know those techniques aren't unique to anime, but my entertainment media is about 60% audio music and 40% anime, so that's the visual medium I can relate most to.)

At the same time, I want to write stories and characters that feel more realistic and relatable to me and my experiences. And "realistic" here is a relative term, I think, because there are plenty of "realistic" stories out there that feel unrealistic to me, simply because I don't think like the characters on screen do. People and stories can be real without feeling "realistic" to me because of that large distance between how I think and act and how other people think and act. So "realistic" probably isn't the best term to use, but what I mean when I say I want to write "realistic" characters is that I want to write characters who make choices that seem reasonable within my own worldview. Not that every character has to do things exactly the way I myself would do them. I mean that I have in mind a range of possibilities of how a character can think or act without becoming like a cartoon exaggeration that's just a plot tool and not an actual person, and I try to keep my characters within that range.

It's hard for me to relate to or like most characters, one of the main reasons being that most characters have sexual and romantic interests and desires, and I don't know what that's like. And

characters that don't have those interests tend to be portrayed as brusque and standoffish, until some kind of partner comes in and softens them up. It's treated as normal to expect any given character to want or eventually end up in some kind of romantic relationship, even if that wasn't a priority for them, which gives the impression that singleness or lack of interest in romance or sex are problems that need to be fixed.

And then outside the canon narrative, you have shipping in fandom, which will take singleness and "fix" it even if the narrative itself doesn't treat it like a problem that needs to be fixed. This is the main reason I can't interact with the Yu-Gi-Oh fandom online, because it seems like 99% of it is geared toward shipping, and the reason Yu-Gi-Oh was always so important to me from the beginning (I started watching it when I was 11 in 2001) is because it was about *friendship* and how important *friendship* is, and to me, the main characters always seemed very asexual and aromantic and even gender-non-conforming. I loved that Yugi was a little goth teen who loved his friends and fought passionately for their sake and wasn't embarrassed to be gentle and kind and compassionate and never had any romantic partner in 224 episodes. He was practically perfect in my opinion, and then years later I entered the Yu-Gi-Oh fandom on Tumblr and discovered that everyone shipped him with any number of characters, making him sexually and romantically active. I didn't recognize him at all in the hands of these other fans who drew him and wrote him in sexual situations. And it made me *angry*. It made me so angry that all these people couldn't handle having one asexual aromantic protagonist and had to mutilate his character in order to fulfill their sexual and romantic fantasies. It made me angry that they took the one important representation I felt I had and pushed a sexual and romantic interpretation on him where, to my eyes, there was no evidence to support it. I had to leave the fandom fairly quickly in order to stay sane, and that was why I only wrote fanfiction for myself, to keep Yugi—and all the other characters that mattered to me because of their apparent asexual aromantic orientations—safe and preserved the way I knew them.

And I love writing vampires for the same reason, because to me, vampires make the perfect asexual representation. Since they're dead, they have no real biological functions that would make sex possible. And yet, everyone else will take the vampire bloodsucking as a metaphor or euphemism for sex.

And that makes me *angry*. When I see bloodsucking, I see *bloodsucking*. I don't see it as foreplay leading up to sex, I see it as the end in itself, because blood is what a vampire wants and needs. Vampires to me have always felt *safe* because they were never sexual in my mind. I like *Interview With a Vampire* (the movie, I never read the book), because the vampires don't feel sexual at all to me. But then new kinds of vampires started showing up in mainstream media and suddenly they became sex gods and everyone wanted to have sex with the sexiest vampires, and it just ruined everything. So I have to write my own vampire stories to get all the bloodsucking without any sexual innuendo or actual sex attached to it.

Characters have always mattered more to me than plot. If I like a character, I can read about them doing the most mundane things and enjoy it, whereas even the most dramatic and intense stories don't affect me much if I don't care about the characters. And I would guess that's true at least partly because I've never had many friends. I had a few people I hung out with at middle school, but especially in high school and college, I didn't have anyone I would have called a friend. Most of the time I was fine with that, since I am an introvert and I like being alone, but there were definitely times when loneliness hit and I really *felt* how isolated I was. Fictional characters filled the space that real people didn't fill for me. I didn't think of them as friends, but writing them was a form of relationship and intimacy that I needed to feel happy. I wrote myself into stories in order to interact with characters I liked and related to. Characters helped me not seek out unsatisfying relationships in real life out of desperation for human interaction. I have heard so many stories from people talking about how they dated or made friends with toxic people just because they couldn't stand being alone. I didn't want to be like that. So I filled my loneliness with writing and feeling familiar with characters who were important to me, for whatever reasons.

That's why in much of my writing I focus on the inner life and experience of characters, because I want to feel like I really understand and relate to them. I want to know everything about them as a way to make up for the fact that I feel so distant from people in real life because I don't know more than I can see on the surface. And I also want to be clear and explicit about my characters' thoughts because the normative way of reading scenes is through a sexual and romantic and gendered lens, so if I'm not explicit about how a character is resisting and rejecting those things, a lot of readers wouldn't be able to

understand the character or scene the way I want them to<sup>10</sup> (and I know this because I've seen how fans will take the tiniest little thing and extrapolate entire essays of meta about why the little thing proves a character is X, Y or Z).

As much as I love writing though, it can be exhausting having to write almost *everything* for my own entertainment and joy. It would be nice to be able to just enjoy things as easily as other people can, people who aren't repulsed by sex and romance and gender and meat and alcohol and drugs, all of which are so rampant in everything except the most benign of children's stories. I can only assume that is the case because most people can relate to those things, or they like them, or they are at least so normal they're not a bother.

But those things make it near impossible for me to enjoy a story, but I recognize that I am a minority and content creators aren't targeting people like me when they write. So I have to do it. Because I've only written stories that I want, with characters that I want, using a vocabulary, style, and tone that appeals to my aesthetic taste, I usually don't share my fiction. I'm not writing for anyone else, so why *would* I share it? Not sharing makes me feel free to write exactly what I want and not worry about any judgments on its quality, which feels like a judgment not only on my skills as a writer but on my tastes in fiction.

Because of that, this project is going to be both an opportunity and a challenge. Even though the idea of sharing my writing makes my anxiety flare up to a nauseating degree, seeing what other people actually do think of my writing could be a good experience. And being able to engage with feedback from readers to better craft a story that has an effect beyond just myself seems like a skill worth developing in general, even if after this I still don't go on to attempt publishing any fiction.

### **Expected Challenges**

The editing process has always been my main challenge with writing because I'm so harsh on myself as a reader. Instead of getting outside feedback, I just keep rereading my own writing, revising and

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<sup>10</sup> <https://arotaro.tumblr.com/post/177540332296/do-you-have-any-advice-for-writing-aromantic>

editing over and over until I get it to a point that I can finally just enjoy reading it without being distracted by a thought of how to edit it anymore. Usually, I'm able to solve most structural or scene-based challenges just by writing through it. I'll get an idea as I'm writing that will fill a blank I had in my head, or I'll get a sketch down and come back to flesh it out later, or I'll just do trial and error until I figure out what feels best to me. So I'm not too concerned about those kinds of challenges. The most daunting challenge for me is always going back to read something I've written, because even though while I'm writing, I feel good and confident about the work, when I actually finish, suddenly all that confidence vanishes and I'm afraid that when I read over it, I'll be mortified by how horrible it actually is. If I can get a story to the point that I read it and think to myself, "Wow, I actually really like this, I like these sentences that I wrote, and reading this piece exactly as it is right now is an enjoyable experience," to me that would be the pinnacle of success.

Another challenge this project can give me as a writer is that of actually finishing a story. I have a *lot* of stories that I have started since at least my middle school years, but I rarely finish anything. Actually, I rarely ever *intend* to finish anything, because I like leaving writing projects open to continuation as my interest and inspiration fluctuates and flows around from story to story. By leaving projects in a constant state of ongoing progress with no pressure to finish them, I feel a freedom to just write exactly what I'm in the mood to write and not feel like I have to force myself to work on any particular one. But I do feel a kind of excitement at the prospect of having at least one finished story in my files. It will require a different kind of approach to the writing process and a different kind of focus, and I'm interested in putting that challenge on myself.

Thinking more specifically about content, I think one challenge might be using and framing words loaded with (hetero)sexual connotations in a way that reclaims them for non-sexual usage. It is so frustrating when I want to use words that feel good and meaningful for me in asexual and aromantic ways but hesitate because they get read as sexual euphemisms or just "prettier" ways of referring to sexuality. It isn't fair! These words (like *intimate*, *sensual*, *passionate*, *arouse*, *stimulate*, *excite*, even *love* when it's

not qualified<sup>11</sup>) don't feel sexual or romantic to me, and they don't *have* to be sexual/romantic, yet somehow they have been made sexual/romantic by default! These words should be mine because they aren't sexual, but because they have been colored with innuendo by a sex-obsessed society, I have to *reclaim* words that should have always been mine. They should have to be proven sexual or romantic by context, but instead, I have to do extra work to create context that makes it clear they aren't sexual or romantic. And because I read things as asexual and aromantic by default, it could be helpful to get all eyes to read my writing and tell me if my framing is working.

### **Traits of My Writing**

There are some basic premises that have a constant effect on my approach to story and style that seem worth mentioning explicitly. More often than not, if I at least find the concept for a story by another author interesting, the actual execution of disappoints me. The things that seem normal in mainstream stories that I can't stand and avoid in my own fiction are:

1) a concept of gender; 2) sex, sexuality, sexual tension, and sexual violence; 3) romance, romantic attraction, romantic tension; 4) unnecessary relationship drama and people being stupid because of relationship drama; 5) alcohol and/or drugs; 6) friendships I can't understand (being friends with people who treat you badly, who you don't like, or who you don't have meaningful things in common with); 7) "strong" characters who are actually just rude or mean; 8) prose sounds too poetic and Romantic; 9) first-person narration; 10) present-tense narration; 11) archaic language and dialogue (even if it's set in earlier times or a fantasy reflective of earlier times); and 12) especially in fantasy stories, plots that center on monarchies, because haven't we all agreed by now that monarchies are not a moral or glamorous way to structure society? So why is it still such a popular centerpiece of fantasy? Frankly, the anarchist in me is tired of any drama/conflict involving governments at all.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://arotaro.tumblr.com/post/170003128251/stebens-i-think-it-says-a-lot-about-the>

I don't like present tense because I can't step into a scenario where a person would naturally be narrating a scene as it's happening. The frame becomes too contrived, so it creates a mental block for me and I can't feel immersed in the story. The narrator just feels too noticeable and artificial. And I don't like first-person narrators for the same reason: I can't imagine a scenario where someone would actually narrate a novel-length story, and certainly not with the coherency and edited manner found in novels.

A third-person narration is artificial too, certainly, but to me, a third-person narration isn't trying to come across as believable. We enter the story knowing we're getting an impossible view of events and impossible insights into people's thoughts. We know that and accept that. But with first-person narration, it feels like the narration is trying to come across as believable, to try to make the character feel like someone who is right there with you telling you this story. And it doesn't do that for me. I can accept the impossible scenario that I am seeing what's happening like in a movie, from whatever angle is best to capture the most important elements of the scene, because no one is trying to convince me that the narrator is a person who conveniently managed to see all the events. It is by default impossibly convenient to the author's purposes. But a first-person narration feels like it's trying to convince me that the narrator is the kind of person who would narrate a whole novel to a listener and that there is a believable situation that would give the character an opportunity to do so. I don't mean to suggest that my opinion is "right" or more enlightened, only to explain why I use third-person past-tense narration.

As for gender, I will be dealing with that subject through direct commentary (narration and dialogue), characters and plot lines that deal with challenging the concept of gender, and play with pronouns. There will be neo-pronouns that convey personal identities for agender characters contrasted with pronouns used socially that don't always match up with that personal identity, and the emotional stress that causes. Working with pronouns is actually an important point for me, so it's something I'm excited to put out there in the open. For myself, no pronoun feels truly *right*. Definitely neither "he" nor "she" feels right, but "they" doesn't feel like the perfect fit either. I think if I were going to choose a neo-pronoun, I'd probably choose the "ze" pronoun because I love the letter z, but it still doesn't feel clearly *right*. And I think part of that comes down to the idea that pronouns are based on gender. No matter what,

as an agender person who rejects the concept of gender, choosing a pronoun at all feels awkward, because even though I'm choosing a gender-neutral pronoun, it still feels like I'm accepting the validity of gender as a way to frame my identity, which I don't want to do. I don't want to be an "other" in contrast to "male" and "female", I want to be in a context where none of those categories exist. But since I can't do that, I have to play the game, and even if I choose the "other" option, it feels like I'm acknowledging the game as valid, which I don't.

My basic question from an agender perspective is, why are pronouns based on gender/sex? Why does it seem like it hasn't occurred to anyone that pronouns (if we're going to commit to using such things in our language) don't *have* to be based on gender/sex? They could be based on anything we choose. But of all the things about ourselves that we could choose from, society decided that gender/sex is fundamental enough to our identity that it is reasonable to substitute our names with it.

For people who accept the prominence of sex and gender in society and as aspects of their identity, this may not register as an issue. I know it didn't register with me for most of my life. But it has definitely become an issue that I am constantly, *painfully* aware of, and I like to experiment with different ways to deal with or erase gender in fiction, as I will do in this novel. And I appreciate fiction for being an opportunity to immerse myself and readers in a normalized use of alternative pronouns that we (currently) can't get in real life.

## **Genre**

The story I have planned will be fantasy, at least in my mind. I can see how some readers might think of it more as science fiction since my non-human character will be from outside the universe and that could make them seem like an alien. But to me, they don't have an alien "feel". Science fiction imagery like outer space, aliens, robots, AI, and advanced technology and science in general don't resonate with me, so I don't seek them out and I don't write them. I will write this particular non-human character not so much as "magical" in the traditional fantasy sense (though I do that often enough in my other writing) but in a way that feels "transcendent" without being based in science or magic. And for me, transcendence is a feeling of freedom, of being in spaces that don't define humans and human

relationships through bodies or genders or bizarre attractions. So while the story to me feels like fantasy in terms of genre (characters can do impossible things without the aid of science or technology), it also feels like a representation of my ideal existence as opposed to being human.

I see a lot of aromantics talk online about how they identify with science fiction kinds of characters, like robots and AIs, because they don't feel programmed to understand "basic human emotions" like romance. In my case, I've always felt drawn to fantasy non-human characters, the immortals like angels and demons and vampires who live outside human time and feel detached from the strange ways humans operate. Jemisin's *Inheritance* trilogy resonated with me because of the god characters who exist outside of the human realm and transcend the microscopic perspective humans have on everything. I like fantasy stories like that for being cosmic in scope, like the Japanese manga series *Angel Sanctuary* and L. A. Banks' *Minion* series, because when you have a story that puts human life in comparison against immortals, what I get out of it is that being human isn't important. It encourages me to dissociate from "human" as an identity even more because humans don't matter in the grand scheme of things, so why should I care if I don't relate to some "basic" things that are promoted as "universal" for all humans? Humans are small and insignificant. If I'm not qualified to be human (the voidpunk experience), then I'm free to transcend that identity and be something else, something beyond flesh and space and time.

I know that kind of narrative happens in science fiction too, where the question "What does it mean to be human?" comes up regarding robots and AI, but those things still don't resonate with me and I think it comes from the fact that science fiction seems to be about humans trying to transcend themselves by learning more and building more. It's transcendence with a human source. I want transcendence separate from humans completely. I don't want to become immortal because my consciousness was digitized and put in a computer program, I want to become immortal because I shed my false physical body and became the immortal spirit I was always meant to be by nature's design. That's the kind of image that resonates with me, for whatever reason.

## Media Community

It's hard to think of books that have strong similarities to what I have in mind to write. Some mainstream books that I am aware of that introduce genders beyond just (cis)male and (cis)female are *The Mirror Empire* by Kameron Hurley, *Salvation* by Peter F. Hamilton, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* by N. K. Jemisin, *Ancillary Justice* by Anne Leckie, *The Collapsing Empire* by John Scalzi, *Dawn* by Octavia Butler, and *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin. There is also a growing number of authors in the indie LGBTQ presses (usually ebooks) that are presenting agender, asexual, and aromantic characters and that use neo-pronoun and gender-neutral pronouns. (I won't get into how much it irks me when "gender" is used to mean "biological sex", and when "asexual" is used instead of "sexless" to describe beings that have no biological sex, because I don't have the space for that, but it's something I only see happen in mainstream fiction.)

In my writing, I often leave out gender entirely rather than having some characters who have alternative genders and some who are a normative cisgender. I also normalize asexuality and aromanticism so much that I never even talk about sex or romance because neither exists in the story. I find that it's not enough for a story to have "asexual representation" in the form of one or two characters because I am so deeply sex repulsed—I need a story to be completely sex-free to be feel safe. And I still don't understand what romance is so I can't describe romantic relationships versus platonic, intimate relationships, so I leave that concept out. I do that because when I'm writing for myself, I don't feel a huge need to explain what it's like to be asexual or aromantic or agender, I already know it because it's my life. But for a wider audience, I will be writing my version of a story that describes the experience some asexual, aromantic, and agender characters have in a world that normalizes sex, romance, and gender. And unlike some other science fiction and fantasy books, my characters (except for one) will be human. There is a trend for authors to make their asexual, aromantic, and other-gender characters not human, whether they're aliens (Le Guin, Butler) or AI (Leckie) or genetically engineered species

(Hamilton) or gods (Jemisin). While I enjoy my identities being tied to fantasy beings, Christine Prevas, who is non-binary, says what many of us think about this<sup>12</sup>:

“Often, like in the case of Soro or Janet, non-binary identity becomes a specific indicator that a character is *not* human, a distinct marker that sets them apart from humanity where their appearance might not. Other times, as with Tak and the Aandrisk, non-binary identity is meant to signify just how different—how alien—another culture is to humans. Non-binary identity becomes a shorthand for whatever it is that sets a character or group of characters apart from humans.

The problem here is that the non-binary people like me who want to see themselves represented and validated in the fiction they read, who might benefit most from seeing a character with alternate pronouns in their escapist media—*are* human. And most of the time, we’re faced with a daily barrage of people questioning the legitimacy of our gender identity.

It doesn’t help anyone to say that aliens, robots, and monsters may have non-binary identities, but to imply by exclusion that humans do not.”

This brings up the issue of voidpunk and why the idea of embracing dehumanization took off last year on Tumblr. Aromantic, asexual, agender, autistic, and other neurodivergent people often feel like they are not seen as fully human by others. They receive the message, either implicitly or explicitly, that to have a fulfilling life and be whole as a person, you must want sex, romance, be one of two genders, and be allistic. If even one of those is lacking, you must be “broken” in some way or not be programmed right. That message has hurt a lot of people, and a way of coping can be to say, “No, you’re right, I’m *not* human, and I’m absolutely ok with that.” Because if you can embrace the thing that is supposed to hurt you, then that takes the person’s power away.

But at the same time, that doesn’t stop the systemic problems that can come from aromanticism, asexuality, agender and nonbinary identities, and neurodivergence not being taken seriously. It can be

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<sup>12</sup> <https://arotaro.tumblr.com/post/176099568406/its-petty-but-im-actually-annoyed-by-asexual>

empowering to claim a kind of inhumanity in the face of toxic “discourse”, but when you are out living your life and looking for resources regarding health, education, safety, and legal rights, being treated as not fully human is a threat to your well-being (as other minorities know already).

So while I do not enjoy being human and often write about how dissatisfying it is to be human (and hence my love for fantasy and magical beings), I do recognize the importance of being recognized as a whole person who is due rights and dignity and respect in society. As Alex Dally MacFarlane says in her essay about Leckie’s *Ancillary Justice*, “Non-gendered people are not a science fictional concept. They are real people.”

### **The Story**

The project I have in mind is a fantasy-genre novel that focuses heavily on the characters and their inner lives as they react to the social norms around them. I do that because that’s how I feel close to my characters, and also because my primary goal is to show what the experience of being asexual, aromantic, and agender is like. A lot of the conflict comes from the mismatch between how a character feels about themselves and how other people—whether individually or society at large—sees them.

The main character is Cory, a seventeen-year-old who doesn’t consider xemself to be a boy or any gender at all. In the narrative parts of the story, I use “xe/xir/xem” pronouns (as opposed to “he/his/him”) to represent that agender identity, but since the story takes place in the mid-90s and neo-pronouns like “xe” aren’t around yet, I use “they/their/them” pronouns in dialogue whenever someone wants to talk about Cory in a gender-neutral way.

Another main character is Ae, who is a non-human being that comes to Earth and meets Cory. Because Ae is from outside human constructs of sex and gender, e has no gender identity either. For Ae, I use “e/eir/em” pronouns to convey eir agender identity in the narrative part and the same “they/their/them” pronouns in gender-neutral dialogue.

Vio is another character who is sixteen years old and also considers himself outside of gender, but because he doesn’t really prioritize it much, he doesn’t mind being called “he”, so “he/his/him” pronouns are used throughout for Vio.

I present the pronouns in the story without much commentary at first because that's how it works in real life too (or at least that is my experience with it interacting with people who use neo-pronouns online). You don't know why they chose the pronouns they did, you just know that's what they use when you hear other people talking about them. And there are still neo-pronouns I haven't seen before, so when I'm reading a passage and encounter a pronoun I don't know, I have to just figure out by context what it is (subject, adjective, or object), and generally speaking it's pretty easy to pick up on because of grammar and sentence structure. So I wanted to make the experience in my story similar, where the pronouns were simply used and readers have to figure out from the context what the pronouns are.

Two other major characters are graduate students, Aki and Zoe, who are in an intimate relationship that is never labeled romantic or sexual, but does have sensual aspects to it (like kissing). They are a kind of contrast to Cory and Ae, who also have an intimate relationship that is neither romantic nor sexual, but is also not sensual. And Vio does not have a "primary" intimate relationship of any kind and doesn't want one because he is happy having multiple close friends that he cares about. With these characters, I wanted to show at least some variety of how aromantic people can form close relationships.

The story revolves around Cory wanting to find a way to evolve out of xir physical humanity, because after meeting Ae, who shows xem that e is a being who has a consciousness and existence very similar to a human's, just not locked up inside a physical body, Cory wants to become like that too. Cory has never had any friends before meeting Ae, and xe has a very distant relationship with xir parents, so xe doesn't feel connected to the world at all and wants to get out. But at first, neither xe nor Ae knows if xe will be able to break out of xir body, which causes a lot of frustration as xe continues to interact with people who don't understand xir feelings on gender. The more people want to box xem into being a "man", the more xe wants to break away from being human entirely.

In the meantime, xe is a talented musician whose only joy in life has been making xir own music. From a young age, xe spent xir time alone, learning piano first and then the guitar and writing lyrics and composing xir own songs. At the beginning of the story, xe has recently become the lead singer of a band

with some older guys, but that causes some internal tension for Cory too because xe doesn't make music to be popular or famous like the bandmates hope to be, xe likes making music for xemself.

The story starts off with Cory and the band performing in the bar where Zoe works as a bartender and where Cory gets into a confrontation with xir cousins, who are in college and happen to show up. During the week that follows, Cory has band practice and more shows to play at, xe has conversations with xir parents who suddenly start showing an interest in xem, and Zoe starts wondering if Ae has any powers as a non-human that can help make the world better. Then Cory has Ae come to the monthly family dinner that bring xir parents, cousins, aunt and uncle together, which turns into another dramatic confrontation.

After that, there is a shooting at the bar while Zoe and Aki are there, and when Ae sees that Zoe and Aki are injured, e feels a rage toward the shooter that works as a catalyst to let em discover how to force a change on another person. But because Ae is angry, e isn't interested in making people better (which is Zoe's intention), rather e just wants to kill whoever e doesn't like. E kills the shooter by obliterating every cell in their body, and realizes how easy it is and that e can do this to anyone now. So then Zoe has to convince Ae not to wipe out a lot of people, and after managing that, Ae helps the four humans who know e isn't human (Cory, Vio, Zoe, and Aki) transcend their physical bodies so that they can do the same thing Ae can, and while Ae and Cory leave earth for a while, Zoe and Aki take charge of changing the world, not by killing people like Ae would have done, but by changing the way people think. So within a matter of years, the world undergoes a drastic change as people fundamentally agree on certain values and goals for how society should run.

The story ends with Ae and Cory coming back to earth after a while to visit Zoe, Aki, and Vio and finding that they have helped the world become a place where people can flourish. By erasing people's commitment to restrictive norms, especially those around gender and relationship structures, there is a massive increase in diversity of expression and the kinds of relationships people build in their lives. And even Cory, who has never been a fan of people in general, thinks the world looks much better

now. But xe still prefers to not be around too many people, so again xe and Ae take off to be in empty space and leave taking care of humans to Zoe and Aki.

I also plan on using the structure of flashbacks in this story because then I can organize events by theme rather than being strictly chronological, which can be inefficient in showing what I want to show when and how I want to show it. If a story is purely chronological, I feel like there's a lot more filler to do to connect every event together, a lot more "telling" of how time passed between events, whereas with flashbacks, I can just show exactly what parts are important with little need to explain *and then this happened and then this happened and then this happened*.

One more comment about pronouns: the characters themselves use pronouns in their dialogue that are available to them in their time period while the narrative voice uses pronouns they would use for themselves if the story took place in the current time. Narrative voices can have access to information that the characters themselves do not, including neo-pronouns like xe and e. So while the characters talk about themselves in one way due to limits in their context, the narrative voice can talk about them in a way that is more correct based on the individual character.

### **Dissertation Process**

The writing process, as I imagine it, will go something like this:

First, I will write a full draft of the whole novel, which I should be able to finish in May or June of 2019. Once I have that done, I will be better able to know what kinds of revisions I want to make based on how every scene feels relative to the whole. I will then go through and make the revisions I know I want to make. Then I will give revised chapters, in order, one by one to my committee chair, Stacie McCormick. She will read and respond to the chapter, and then we can discuss if she, as a reader with fresh eyes and a different perspective, sees any places that need revision to help a reader better understand what I am trying to convey.

Since Matt Pitt will be on leave for the academic year 2019-2020, I will be sharing chapter with him in bundles, and he will respond on a schedule that is more spread out, maybe every three months, to give feedback from the perspective of craft and creative writing.

After getting feedback and responding to suggestions with some revisions, I will send chapter drafts to the other committee members, Neil Easterbrook and David Colón. All stages will give me the opportunity to find out what changes could help make my ideas, points, and purposes clearer to other readers.

As a fantasy novel, I imagine the word count for the final story could end up around 100,000 words<sup>13</sup>, but that's just a general estimate. Ideally the word count will just be whatever it needs to be for the story to feel right. I think this could end up being around ten chapters, with my chapters averaging around 11,000 words, so to cut down on the number of rounds my chapters will make through the committee, I will wait until I have two or three chapters to send at once. That should make it more comparable to the number of chapters in a traditional dissertation.

Depending on the time it takes to get feedback and do revisions to everyone's satisfaction, I could potentially defend in spring of 2020 at the earliest, but I wouldn't be surprised if the mismatch in people's schedules means defending in spring of 2021.

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<sup>13</sup> See <https://thoughtsonfantasy.com/2017/02/14/how-long-should-a-fantasy-book-be/> and <https://thewritepractice.com/word-count/>, the latter saying, "Science fiction and fantasy novels typically have a word count between 90,000 to 125,000 words."

## VITA

### Personal

K A Wyrick (they/them)

Born September 17, 1989 in Denton, Texas

First-born child of Susan Singletary and Fred T. Wyrick

Caregiver of two precious bunnies, Yusagi and Bunkura

### Education

2021 Ph.D. English Literature, Texas Christian University

Graduate Certificate in Women and Gender Studies

2012 BA Summa Cum Laude, English, Abilene Christian University

Honors College, Minors in Women and Ethnic Studies, Spanish, and Biblical Text

2008 High School Diploma, The Woodlands High School

National Merit Scholar, Top 10% of graduating class

### Work Roles

2016-2021 Library Specialist I, Texas Christian University

2015-2016 English Department Graduate Assistant, Texas Christian University

2015 Graduate English Instructor, Texas Christian University

2012-2015 Women and Gender Studies Graduate Assistant, Texas Christian University

### Organizations

2017 International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts Presentation, Orlando, Florida

2015-16 Triota Vice President, Delta Zeta Chapter, Texas Christian University

2013 National Women's Studies Association Conference Presentation, Cincinnati, Ohio

2012 Alpha Chi National Conference Presentation, Baltimore, Maryland

2011-2012 Alpha Chi Treasurer, Texas Psi Chapter, Abilene Christian University

2011-2012 Sigma Delta Pi Secretary, Omega Gamma Chapter, Abilene Christian University

2011-2012 Sigma Tau Delta Secretary, Tau Epsilon Chapter, Abilene Christian University

2011 Alpha Chi National Conference Presentation, San Diego, California