

*STEM OF A KIND: A SOCIOLOGICAL CREATIVE WRITING STORY ON MARXIST
ALIENATION, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TECHNOLOGY,
NEO-FEUDALISM, AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY
FROM AN AFROFUTURIST, SOLARPUNK LENS*

by

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Abstract

In modern American society, issues of poverty, mental illness, isolation, and environmental degradation stain the lived experiences of the masses. Rather than potentially solving the widening wealth gap in the nation, many Americans worry that the fast-paced advancement of technology, especially within artificial intelligence, will exacerbate class issues further. As with all technology, artificial intelligence exists as a tool that can be used for numerous applications and outcomes, but it operates within the mission of its users and programmers. What does it look like when artificial intelligence is used to exclude lower-class citizens from participation in society completely? Likewise, what does it look like when artificial intelligence is used to advance the progression toward equity in society? The science fiction and Afrofuturist piece, *Stem of a Kind*, explores these questions alongside themes of love, liberation, exploitation, community, and value.

Introduction

More and more in the United States every day, a collective consciousness seems to be rising over the mutual feeling that we are being “priced out of life”, a phrase coined by Instagram user @thatyayalady on her now deleted TikTok account, where she discussed the general decline of civility and the desire to participate in the social contract because of growing financial strain being experienced by most Americans. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (“Consumer Price Index Summary”), the cost of necessities has risen, with essentials such as food, housing, transportation, and electricity all experiencing significant inflation over months alone. In a matter of two generational cohorts, the prospects for life chances have considerably declined. Whereas for Boomers and Generation X members, purchasing a house on one or two incomes split between a couple seemed entirely realistic and reasonable, many Millennials and Gen Zers now expect to never own a house in their lifetimes, even with multiple degrees under their belt and often while earning two to three incomes between one to two individuals. Higher education remains expensive, while the education ultimately garnered feels riskier in value than before (Cappelli). To many, the prospect of life seems like an uphill battle of competing with one’s peers that will ultimately never be rewarded, yet this same competition is simply unavoidable.

What happens to a world in which those who have created an increasing condition of hopelessness within the masses? When the exponential advancement towards technological singularity continues to create classist divides, how can a point of reconnection between peoples be reached? My story, *Stem of a Kind*, explores the futuristic struggle of humanity under the amplified strain of the systems which will be further detailed below. *Stem of a Kind* follows Aiyana Keita, a twenty-four-year-old black woman in the year 2092, who lives in a world where most pre-quaternary sector jobs have been replaced by artificial intelligence and automation. This results in an American society with a virtually non-existent middle class, operating under state oligarchies ran by technological conglomerates; citizens of these oligarchies are granted a universal basic income unsustainable for life and live constantly under the threat of being arrested for homelessness or unproductivity. Monumental artificial intelligence technology has allowed the Enterprise, the tech oligarchy under which Aiyana lives, to have near limitless

reach in regulating its population, but Aiyana possesses great technological knowledge which puts her just in reach of the potential to deconstruct the entire system. To determine her role within the system she is a part of Aiyana must negotiate philosophical inquiries of value through both the communities she builds relationships within and the alienation she feels inside, all while under constant attack by structural systems of suffering and poverty.

Stem of a Kind opens in 2092 and in the fictional Onyx Front, a large region within the current United States that is governed by the Enterprise, a monopoly tech company run by the charismatic Aron Front, who created the BLUEKIND artificial intelligence that operates most human jobs. Aiyana and her four-year-old son, Ayan, live amongst the Folksmen's Den, a commune of freelance workers struggling to make ends meet to keep the abandoned mall which they inhabit. Concealing her technological abilities and accompanying her friend, Micaela, on jobs, a hair-trigger situation forces Aiyana to reveal her talents to Micaela, who prods her that she must do something. Although fear drives her to initially resist this destiny, a dire situation presents her and the Folksmen with an ultimatum threatening their very existence. As the Folksmen community scrambles to establish conditions for a moratorium on that very same ultimatum, an unexpected attack serves as the final push Aiyana needs to put her special knowledge of the Enterprise's technology into action. Readers will be challenged to question Aiyana's motivations and the motivations, fears, and hopes of the communities in which she exists through our modern lens, which will further inform communal speculation and a grappling with both our own futures and the futures of those both like and far unlike ourselves.

Our current world, in which the story is indubitably inspired, captures a picture of the people living in it as one of depression, fatigue, cynicism, lack of motivation, and distance from one's job. According to the World Health Organization, up to twenty-six percent of the American population suffers from depression, which is predicted to outpace heart disease as the highest disease incidence rate worldwide by 2030. The Journal of Emergency, Trauma, and Shock describes the strain being placed on hospitals and community organizations, which have both been pushed to the brink of their capacity to address this national epidemic (Tucci and Moukaddam p. 4). In terms of fatigue, cynicism, lack of

motivation, and separation from work, the American Psychological Association reports heightened levels of burnout, with up to forty-four percent of American workers reporting physical fatigue, twenty-six percent reporting a lack of interest, motivation, or energy, and thirty-six percent describing cognitive weariness (Abramson). These percentages have risen starkly since the pandemic, which in the wake of we have seen people struggle to adjust to the new costs of living.

Amid the burnout and stress experienced from our jobs and careers, a “loneliness epidemic” has prevented many people from safely and healthily leaning on a strong sense of friendship or community for help. Even before the pandemic, people across age groups reported stark levels of loneliness, and statistical data points to the fact that we are spending less time around our peers than before. This is most starkly seen in youth from fifteen to twenty-four, who are spending seventy percent less time with their peers than this same age group twenty years ago. Loneliness exists in tandem with personal effects: amongst all age groups, it increases anxiety and brings increased risks of stroke and heart disease, even correlating with higher rates of dementia in older adults (Summer et. al.) A loneliness epidemic not only marks disconnection between Americans but is further stated to be a source of people becoming increasingly skeptical of interactions and wary of rejection, resulting in people actively avoiding making connections – according to University of Chicago psychologist, John Cacioppo (Prinzing and Frederickson). Not only have we become alienated from our labor, but starkly alienated from one another in society.

The phenomenon of loneliness, albeit unfortunate, is not as shocking when the lack of third places in our society is considered. Third places are aspects of a society’s infrastructure that consist of “neighborhood environments, streetscapes, organizations, and institutions that facilitate social connections among people” as spaces separate from the home, the “first place”, or the workplace, which is considered the “second place”. Third places are characterized by being “simple, unassuming, and usually affordable places to ‘hang out’ ... relax, play, and build community”, and are believed to be important to generating social surplus in a society, creating feelings within a community of “diversity, trust, civility, and an overall sense of togetherness” (Finlay et. al. p. 1). However, since the Great

Recession, the United States has seen a substantial number of third space establishments closing across the nation (Finlay et. al. p. 2), affecting the functionality of the neighborhoods they leave behind. Fun and community themselves have become more expensive, as places like libraries, coffee shops, and general community parks and plazas have become less readily available and accessible for many Americans.

The separation from our neighbors and peers in American society has happened in conjunction with the gradual, rising asymmetry between wages and labor – Americans, compared to their 1970s counterparts, have witnessed hourly wages fall in comparison to the cost of living, while their average working hours have steadily risen (“How America Gave Up on Overtime for Workers”). Despite this disparity, union membership has drastically declined since the 1980s; deregulation, globalization, and legislation have been weaponized against unions, making it difficult for those experiencing disparities within the labor force to come together and act against their employer (Rosalsky). With a lack of third places, increased hours, lower wages in comparison to inflation, and the increased difficulty of unionizing, it is no wonder that Americans feel a strain on their ability to form communities.

In the consideration of forming unions, one method that has affected the ability of unions to gather and thrive and is particularly poignant to the overall focus and message of this thesis is automation, or the replacement of human workers with machines. Although machinery can be expensive, further technological advancements continue to find faster and less expensive means of producing labor that cannot protest working conditions, making automation a prime option for companies as we advance as a society.

With technological advancements, mankind further experiences alienation from nature as well, experiencing separation from the physical landscape we are in, even amid rapid climate change and “global weirding”, a term coined by Katherine Hayhoe to describe the weather-extremes experienced across the world. Although there are some substantial movements against anthropogenic causes of climate change, many humans view the phenomenon through the lens of human exceptionalism, in which mankind exists outside of their ecosystems and therefore are not privy to the effects of climate change in

the way that most living organisms are (Kim et. al.). We have a unique ability to terraform our environment, which somehow has created a growing belief that we do not have to suffer the consequences of climate change as a species if we do not want to. Rather than move with cautious ethical decisions, we have come to believe our technological advancements will always solve social problems to the extent that we do not have to prevent those social problems from occurring in the first place. Although there are active efforts being made to mitigate climate change, we still live in a society where people heavily entertain the idea of mankind relocating to the atmosphere-less Mars or climate change agreements which still carry significant risks of the world reaching a point of being uninhabitable for human life within the next century.

Economics, even in today's world, continues to treat itself as a discipline separate from the real-time material conditions of the world, with much theory based on theoretical and infinite resources that simply do not reflect the world that we live in. 'Demand' and 'growth' are spoken of in economic contexts with little regard to how finite resources are, looking for infinite growth in an extremely finite world (Green). As a society, our views on nature in the most intimate forms of expression have changed. Since the 1950s, we have seen a grave decline in how much we reference nature in our mediums of art, correlating with a move to urban areas and most success in urban areas coming from working for companies which directly connected employees to environmental degradation (Kesebir and Kesebir). Even after a greater consciousness rose around environmental degradation in the 1960s, facilitated by works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, human exceptionalism and growth have proved more powerful concepts.

Although environmentalist concerns have not had the greatest impact on economic development, one thing that unmistakably has had a great impact is artificial intelligence, or AI. Artificial intelligence has come a long way in the past decade with the advent of technology like Dall-E, which can generate images based on almost any prompt it is fed, and ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence chatbot which can deliver complex dialogue and perform a wide variety of tasks when prompted by a human, including summarizing large amounts of information like essays, emails, or codes. In countries like the United

States, up to sixty percent of people are exposed to artificial intelligence in their daily roles (George et. al.) AI has had a great impact within its ability to perform tasks for humans yet it has already caused substantial job displacement, even with the little amount of time it has existed. With applications in healthcare, finance, education, manufacturing, energy, transportation, agriculture, and so many other sectors of the economy (George et. al.), it is undebatable that AI stands as a formidable force with the power to revolutionize labor.

Throughout history, technological advancements have oftentimes revolutionized the nature of labor into a completely new and generally improved form, corresponding to great advancements in life outcomes in the countries that most readily experience their benefits. However, we now live in a time where people are afraid of the exact opposite happening to them. According to Pew Research, about thirty-seven percent of Americans express more concern than excitement when it concerns the advent of artificial intelligence (Rainie et. al.), and even business experts who express excitement about the revolutionary impact artificial intelligence will have on the workplace also recognize its capability to increase wealth inequality (Shaner), which Americans have directly watched increase over the last couple of decades. There is a recognition of the powerful ability of artificial intelligence to positively move and impact all economic sectors, yet a similar recognition that this substantial power will only benefit Americans in the hands of those who actively have their interests in mind and are actively working towards and making progress in moving towards that direction. With the rates of inflation and efforts to discourage open discussion and unionizing to discuss the cost of living, wages, and the state of labor, it is understandably hard for many Americans to believe that artificial intelligence will not operate as another mean to disenfranchise them.

Based on the observations of these phenomena, the impact it has had on my peers and loved ones, and the impacts they have had on me as an individual, I decided to peer into the future, rejecting the pessimistic lens my generation has been pushed into to instead envision a world in which we use one of our greatest capabilities as a society – our propensity for technological innovation – to create a world more equilateral than initially possible in the material constraints we naturally face. If we are alienated,

and if this has destroyed our relationship to ourselves as individuals, our relationships to the environment, our relationship to craft and labor, and our relationships to one another, how can we move into a space where we rediscover ourselves, sustainability as a practice not separate to, but in conjunction with our technological advancements, rediscover passion in our labor, and recreate community?

I chose to write this story because I would like to highlight the extent to which the alienation of labor can reach when exploitation of the people is both allowed and given near limitless reach. I think it is important that we come to recognize that there is a danger in prioritizing efficiency and output over humanity. There is a danger in allowing inflation and pushing “grind culture” as an escape for conditions in a world where most people will always exist under a certain threshold that makes them vulnerable to the pitfalls being discussed, regardless of how much they work and how many jobs they get.

Moreover, I would like to focus on the importance of community and mutual aid. That community exists for us to connect and form relationships with one another, bond with one another, and help one another up when we are down. There is an idea of constant competition, and some will even argue that humanity is innovative only from a competitive perspective, yet there are so many examples of how our collaboration is what makes us such a successful species.

For one example, community and sustainability go hand in hand. It is a mistake for mankind to think that we are separate from nature when we come from it and naturally are part of the ecological cycle. Even if we view our role in nature from an anthropogenic perspective that centers our experience in an egocentric manner, that perspective best serves us when we view ourselves as stewards of the Earth, tasked with the responsibility of maintaining it no matter where our technological advancements take us.

I would also like to discuss alienation from oneself. I believe our current capitalistic model has put many people in a constant state of defense, where they must “stand on business” and “move in silence”, denying themselves the full process of feelings because they recognize that the world may be too cruel to allow them to experience the raw emotions of their very humanity. Because we are always in competition, we are constantly making decisions based on tearing down others rather than following passion and using our emotions as a point of connection with others. Whenever we do not meet some baseline ideal of

efficiency, it is easy to fall prey to thought processes of worthlessness. Our entire relationship to ourselves is based on producing products, yet we are disconnected from that product, so ultimately, we gain no personal gratification from doing so; rather, it is that we feel more valuable to exist as an object.

In my research, I have divided the themes in which my story is centered around into eight categories: alienation, classism and class stratification, environmental degradation, exploitation, community, liberation, value, and love.

Several characters within the story exhibit the multiple facets of alienation, acting on a will to survive in capitalism rather than on their baseline beliefs, values, and emotions, resulting in them harming others and destroying the very communities in which they live. Aiyana herself operates under a persistent life view of defeatism and complacency, while her best friend, Micaela, expresses a fear of suffering under the system which trumps any drive from passion itself. Through the structure of the labor system they are placed into, characters are forced to compete against each other, even where it is not necessary, and come to view nature itself as an alien other. In the story, the bridge between the Marxist defined classes of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie has become a divide essentially unbridgeable. Artificial intelligence represents this divide, these substantial technological advancements being used to keep one class from dealing with the other rather than in any meaningful way.

Our relationship to the environment directly affects our relationship to one another as humans and in the ecological cycle of the Earth. Environmental degradation destroys community and is directly linked to the health, both physically and mentally, of a society, from the most “developed” to “traditional” societies. Playing a more ambiguous role in the story, environmentalism eventually becomes one of the primary mediums by which community is built. The garden becomes a third place in a community which has no communal spaces; methods of gardening become a point of connection and education which brings people together. Through recognition of the importance of building a relationship with nature, there is a reconstruction of human identity within the ecological system which increases efforts to protect said system; there is also a rejection of human exceptionalism.

Exploitation, for my story's purpose, is when an individual's labor is used and taken without their conscious, informed consent. Marx argues that exploitation of an individual is always present in society, which, yes, it is, but one can “exploit” or use their talent at their own volition (use is a better word) without being “exploited”. Within the story, there are several explorations of exploitation within our society, including the structure of company towns, neo-feudalism, the culture of internships and unpaid work, and penal labor.

Community seems almost to be a central focus of the story, as the goal all protagonists are ultimately reaching for. I would like to focus on community not as a group of people that live around one another, but in the “ubuntu” philosophy, where community involves a deeply connected group of individuals, lives tangled together in mental, physical, and emotional senses, where healing, caring for, and protecting one another become necessities to the quality of one’s life and loneliness is a choice rather than by the force of an exploitative system. The story starts within the structure of the Folksmen’s Den, but when it transitions from this, the characters who start amongst the Folksmen must rebuild community within the heart of Onyx Front and the human exploitation the city thrives on. If “ubuntu” is reached, a more traditional idea of society and an ultimately more sustainable one, coupled with the power of technological advancements also dedicated to the possibility of creating community, then it becomes a tool for creating a liberated society.

An idea I hold near and dear to my heart is that community is liberation. When we talk about liberation, oftentimes we talk about the tearing down of oppressive systems and the freedom which results after, but this tearing down is not possible without solidarity with others. Liberation in the story looks like a community coming together through mutual aid and education and elevation, and then using their interconnectedness to dismantle any structures that would threaten the existence and proliferation of the community they have just constructed, moving as a strategic, yet united, force. The labor union that Aiyana and the other characters are exposed to, The People’s Union, moves on a model of mutual aid, education, and elevation; ultimately, it is through the power of Aiyana, the Folksmen, and other liberation

movements Aiyana brings into the fold further into the story that the power of community, built through mutual aid, comes together with direct action to deconstruct the hegemonic structure of Onyx Front.

I believe that value is intrinsic, I believe that all living things have value and are worthy of a natural chance at life. There are organisms and humans that provide “less” economically or hold less “market value”, but value should not be measured monetarily, especially because money is a concept constructed specifically for human usage. Creating “ecological value” from “monetary value” furthers human exceptionalism, when in fact these two are separate; organisms do not inherently exist because they hold monetary value and their “ecological value” should not be determined based on their ability to prescribe to a manmade system, made to serve the interests of human society. These organisms and humans hold value because they bring value to the life of others, value that a dollar amount cannot be placed on, and simply because atoms have come together to form them.

I believe that actions such as capitalism and climate change unnaturally rob these organisms, humans, and even the Earth itself of its “natural” chance at existence. Throughout the story, and for an epistemology of community to be reached, there is a reconfiguration of how value is defined that moves away from capitalist concepts of market and instrumental value. Aiyana, the Folksmen, and the citizens of Onyx Front are measured by their instrumental value, but when they are shown that this same value is largely volatile and hurts them in more ways than it serves, love within their community is largely responsible for creating a new philosophy of intrinsic value.

Love is the unifying force on which all community, all liberation, and all environmentalism is built. It is what deconstructs alienation and moves us back towards our species-being. In the face of unimaginable hardship, it is our relationships with others, our love for ourselves and nature and those in our lives that pushes us past our burnout, our cynicism, our fatigue in a world that demands we consistently give it more than we have. I believe that under our current economic system, love has been bastardized into a transactional and binary operation which emphasizes the existence of exchange on a mentality of instrumental value, a “friend” or “enemy” dichotomy that lacks the nuance of recognizing the ever-changing forms of love between individuals, and one that rejects anything that is not heterosexual,

anything that is not cisgender, or that does not subscribe to hegemonic masculinity (Connell). Through the expression of diverse models of love within *Stem of a Kind*, I wish to reject the current binary structure of love, instead writing love under a dedication to a definition that is compassionate and complex, recognizing that love is the root of all that I hope to envision through this story.

My style of writing and the concepts within my story have been unmistakably influenced heavily by several different authors, social theorists, and even physicists and other natural scientists. In terms of theory, I credit Marx, Engels, and Marxist thinkers who have furthered Marxist thought and applied other, intersectional dimensions to the frameworks of labor, alienation, and conflict theory. My greatest influence, from Marxist thinkers I have developed much of my construction of the society in which Aiyana lives, including the base and superstructure of her society, the capitalist mode of production, and of course, alienation. I take inspiration from Marx's *Paris Manuscripts* and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. From these texts, I have constructed the personas and experiences of Aiyana and the characters that orbit her, and I have used this as a precursor and supplement to Afrofuturist thoughts, combining the analysis of labor and exploitation with Afrofuturist ideas of liberation and decolonization to imagine greater futures.

Needless to say, Afrofuturism is a great inspiration for me; although the earliest chapters of *Stem of a Kind* feature a predominantly white community, I believe the point of view of Aiyana in this space still brings into question how black futures are viewed in seas of whiteness, and the majority of the book going from that section explores blackness in positions of power and influence, prying to driving change in their communities and leading community and revolution, and in conversations with diversity and intersecting identities of marginalization, including those of race, gender identity, sexuality, and ability.

For this, the first author I would like to pay homage to is Octavia Butler, whose writing style has inspired me to incorporate black futures, environmentalism, and socially focused science fiction into one genre. I am inspired by *Parable of the Sower* in particular, in which Butler's Earthseed serves as a guiding force to much of my concepts of environmentalism and sustainability. There is a particular power in following the protagonist, a young black woman, as she develops her own way of viewing the world and

leads many others from diverse backgrounds into her viewpoint, serving as a driver of change despite her gender, age, and race. I believe there is something also poignant to the black experience about developing a theory of change and hope in a world that could also be viewed through an Afropessimist lens, recognizing the constant subaltern position of black lives, yet Butler creates space for readers to imagine Lauren as the beginning of revolutionary thought that provides a future to those around her.

I am inspired by many black female authors, including bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and Audre Lorde, who have all moved me to consider love in a black, radical, and deconstructed matter which centers human experience and rejects the capitalist, transactional ways of viewing love that have now emerged in our society. Through their writings, I have felt moved to view love not as an operation of financial exchange, but as a radical expression of one's humanity.

First, I would like to recognize the influence of Toni Morrison, who I take much inspiration from when it comes to her exploration of black motherhood. From a historical lens, black motherhood is set apart from all other experiences of motherhood: there is the experience of the mammy archetype and being subjected to mothering the same white children which would go on to oppress them in adulthood (also covered eloquently by Butler in *Kindred*), all while missing raising one's own child and seeing them subjected to abuse, and then there is the experience of having to take both roles due to multiple systems of oppression, including Jim Crow, lynchings and vigilante violence, mass incarceration and the War on Drugs. Through multiple novels, including *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison explores black motherhood through unique lenses which capture the gut-wrenching difficulty of raising children in a deeply misogynistic, racist, and most of all dehumanizing world. Much like the experience of Aiyana, who is introduced as a mother of a young child with his father, once active and present, suddenly missing, Morrison's novels explore what it looks like for black mothers that continue walking alone through the burden of a fire which burns for the explicit purpose of their demise, hand in hand with their child.

bell hooks, specifically within her essay, "Love as the Practice of Freedom", served as a great influence for the incorporation of scenes that depict love in *Stem of a Kind*, both on interpersonal, familial, romantic, platonic levels, and in community, cookout, day-at-the-park levels. She helped me to

recognize the importance of third places in her description of the lack of love and community that comes from not having a space to communicate one's hurt. I believe wholeheartedly that this is the key to creating spaces of unity and liberation amongst many populations – in part it was having a Truth and Reconciliation Committee after the Rwandan genocide that has helped that country heal from it, and if healing from such violence is possible amongst a group of people, then I believe that bell hooks truly recognized the key to community. In addition to this, bell hooks talks about capitalism, specifically within its effect on how we view romantic relationships as transactional rather than free and transformational. I enjoy romance, but I was initially unsure of how such a world would affect the way that romantic relationships formed, but the insight of bell hooks directly helped me develop much of the central relationships within my novel.

In thinking of liberation and the formation of community, Audre Lorde's *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* also aided me in recognizing the pitfalls and capabilities of communities when it came to building trust and relationships amongst themselves as a necessary precursor to liberation. Her thoughts influenced the earliest part of my story, in which Aiyana lives in a majority-white commune, because it began the conversation of, "how can we move towards liberation when there are so many people, all so different from one another, and all so stuck in their individual prejudices and ignorance"? It encouraged me to think outside the box and in innovative, imaginative ways about how great thinkers of diverse colors and creeds could possibly come together to form a community greater for all.

A physicist rather than a creative writer, Max Tegmark's *Life 3.0* played a crucial role in the ideas for the "science" part of the science fiction I am writing, as Tegmark contemplates the infinite possibilities of artificial intelligence, based on the simple element of unpredictability. Tegmark is delightfully imaginative, pointing out that there is no definitive way to draw a mark in the sand and determine whether mankind can produce sentient or sapient technology into the future, and uses a jargonistic, yet comprehensive explanation of the ways in which mankind may bring our creations into questions about the performance of intelligence, memory, learning, and most importantly, consciousness.

Tegmark provides both a far-future focus and a touch on the now, recognizing how far we have come in terms of technological breakthroughs, and how far we could go in wild dreams, yet dreams that are well-constructed and thought out, with a thorough analysis of all the possible scenarios that an artificial sapient life form could bring mankind. I thank Tegmark for giving me the audacity to imagine artificial intelligence that is advanced enough to take over pre-Quaternary human careers, while also possessing the capacity for empathy, learning, and a value system. I believe what I am writing is the type of writing that may sometimes annoy those who are working on artificial intelligence, but I believe Tegmark does a great job of being both realistic and entirely unrealistic, using his extensive scientific expertise to do so.

Lastly, I would like to evoke the work of Nnedi Okorafor, who introduced me to the idea of blackness and science fiction existing within the same story. Okorafor is a pioneer of the black science fiction genre, and although she does not identify her writing as Afrofuturism (preferring the more accurate term, Africanfuturism), she opened the door to me imagining people like me, a Black American and a child of African immigrants, in space odysseys and with advanced technology. *Binti* holds a special place in my heart because I appreciate Okorafor's willingness to reject the notion that African customs and cultures are primitive and will ultimately be left behind in a world that transcends Earth. I believe this perspective is ultimately reductionist and treats Black cultures as if they exist due to ignorance, when in fact they exist due to a collective, perceived beauty and value in their proliferation. Just like in *Binti*, the concept of preserving nature, culture, or other aspects of the human experience due to intrinsic value is central to *Stem of a Kind*.

From this selection of *Stem of a Kind*, I hope for readers to develop a speculative imagination, influenced by their modern observations, which will hopefully grow to include the awareness of diverse identities and their interactions with technology, alienation, value, love, community, and liberation. Inevitably, readers will enter this piece with their own biases; they will have expectations of how certain characters will act and experience the world, and with this, of how each character ultimately fares under the conditions of this society in which they are placed. Based on this, I encourage the development of a communal speculation, in conversation with others and their diverse perspectives and experiences, and

negotiating the potential futures of the characters, especially the complexities of a character like Aiyana. I encourage imagination, especially regarding the past, present, and futures in consideration of Aiyana's capabilities, thoughts and worldviews, and her blackness, womanness, and motherhood. Where will she end up, and where will her passion and pain take her? Most importantly, is there space for her in this world, whether preexisting or to be created? If it is nonexistent, what forces make her future nonexistent? If it is to be created, by the actions of who? Alongside me and one another, enter the world within *Stem of a Kind*.

A New Men's World, 2092

Although she would not stay there tonight, she had spent the last of her coins canoeing to the south side of Onyx Front. It was a place she had frequented in the past months because the abandoned buildings there tended to be built of sturdier stone, so the earthquakes didn't rattle them as much and they held enough heat to keep her and her son warm enough in the winter to sleep, her eye half-open and eyeing all the entrances. It was the American Dream, and you could never be careful enough. She was going to have to break out her big bills now, and her second-last twenty flew out of her hands as soon as the bell of the bodega door she carefully bumped open with her side chimed, guiding her son through by his tiny hand.

Maybe it was the bell that triggered the cashier's sonar sensors, and on the dot he had turned to face her, his body turning out of line with the head atop. It was too fast. Even when she was an undergrad, she would have told them. They never could quite get the locomotion of a man quite right. The Blue cashier's face captured that of a smile. "Welcome. May I assist you?"

As quickly as she entered, she entered an aisle and snatched up as many canned goods as she could almost indiscriminately; no matter how she cut open the cans, she could never quite get the taste of food insecurity away from any meal she consumed over a dumpster fire. There were urgent wind sways of sleeves beneath her, and there her son was, stretching out his hands to her, his eyes stretched greatly. She gave him a light smile before depositing a few cans in his hand. The blessing; he was always more than eager to help.

With him by her side, she walked back up to the counter, all cans in tow; as soon as she stepped in front of the barrier dividing them, the cashier responded, "The ten cans you are both carrying will be \$100. If you still wish to purchase these, we will withdraw the amount from your account." She nodded as she felt her phone buzz in her back pocket, alerting her of the total emptying of her bank account. As the Blue began to bag the cans, her nodding drew her eyes downward for a split second and she scanned over his nametag. Asher, it read, with a crossed out name below it: Aiyana. In fact, only "sher" was written,

and the “Iyana” in her name was crossed out and the A kept for what she assumed was convenience’s sake. Stranger than the name, she had never seen a Blue wear an old nametag before. For the most part, the Enterprise was vigilant at work on erasing all traces of individuals like herself in these roles. She fell into a deadlock at his pale white irises. He shut them and his lips lifted into a smile. Her eyes rolled. Why close them? She knew he still saw.

“Thank you for shopping with us today, Aiyana.”

The sun sat red and hot on the horizon, half-concealed and swimming in the violet of the dusk sky and the billowing clouds like a Maraschino cherry floating on mounds of whipped cream. Underneath her feet was a surface anything but smooth, the desiccated clay soil buckling into tiny crumbles under her steps where the sidewalk had deteriorated to nothing; the toughest of nature’s plants persisted through. Unsure of who it wanted to be and unaided by the indecisive nature of a global climate change, the town fluctuated sporadically between areas of aridity and great saturation. Where the clay grew muddy and small pools of the acidic water gathered, she began calling for a canoe.

Her jelly block heels had begun sinking, and she suddenly was not sure why she had chosen to wear them. Could it be worded better? It was gross, and she would be scrubbing them clean tonight, as she had already decided on tomorrow's outfit. On the contrary, Ayan was dressed perfect for the occasion in his frog-themed, deep blue rain boots, an outfit hand-picked by his own tiny hands. Before she herself knew, he always seemed a step ahead, knowing what weather the sky would bring along for her and him. She gave her baby a light smile. He always looked to her.

In due time, a canoer came rowing her way, stopping at the stream’s shallow point; she lifted her legs far up one after and in front of the other like a spider where the clay gave way to cereal-consistency sogginess. Ayan pattered behind her, and as soon as she released his hand and climbed into the canoe, she leaned over the side to hoist him into sitting between her knees on the warm wood bench.

The canoer had not yet finished the second syllable of “hello” before Aiyana dove her hand into the bag she had been given and retrieved two cans to place on the bench in front of her. “I’m giving this

to you,” Aiyana began, “because you deserve it. I can’t always ride for free.” She fell back onto the bench just after, throwing her head back to the heavens to gaze.

The canoer turned to the cans for a moment while pushing them through the wetlands. “You didn’t have to. I don’t mind. But I’m grateful, all the same. Thanks.” From Aiyana, there would be no, “you’re welcome”, or “of course”, in response. She was gazing at the heavens, and the canoer continued to row.

There was no canoe in her heaven. Instead, it was the long strides of her slender bronze legs taking on the undefiled pavement of a university sidewalk generously littered with the freshest fiery red leaves from trees peppered throughout the green carpet grass lining either side of her. Unconcerned with cans of food or monetary qualms, within the grass lay picnics and Adirondack chairs hosting the finest technical minds the country had to offer lounging. There, where the wind caught her lengthy locs, she could breathe an air worthy of her lungs. In the canoe, her hands held her sturdy on either side as she sat with both eyes firmly shut and inhaled deeply. Her dreams filtered the smog around her.

Ayan trust-fell back between her breasts. His tiny head grounded her, as he had done many times before, and her eyes broke open for her to kiss him on his forehead.

The canoer dropped the pair off less than a quarter-mile from the Folksmen’s Den, where the sod broke from moisture to cracks and a guaranteed dusty foot forward. As she trekked towards the colossal ivory shopping mall, the air itself seemed to rush the noise of idle amusement to her ear, spelling out the utter extent to which the building was filled. Her eyes confirmed her ears as she was granted access to enter by a reciprocated nod between her and the 12-gauge shotgun-wielding men on either side of the gate. She granted both a light smile, but did not speak; as she was new, their names evaded her still. She thanked the heavens brown was darker than red as she entered the Den.

The gargantuan lair buzzed with spread out conversations amongst the many inhabitants as if a grand mess hall. People swarmed in every room, open by their previous purposes as storefronts in a once-bustling shopping center. Most notable to her: the ever-quiet Hasil and Jaid aside in one corner, never breaking the unchallenged silence between themselves as they shined and shined their rifles; the much

louder Milo and Austin engaging one another in aimless franchise banter, and Rome, who watched at a distance with a hint of skepticism as he tinkered a small piece of a much larger generator.

Aiyana stepped further in, Rome's eyes left the two men and fell upon her, first on her warm face, to her torso, waist, and finally, to the bag gripped firmly in her right hand. Unlike the other two men, who waved at Aiyana's presence, breaking out into smiles, Rome stared, and then he pointed further in the mall for her to see. The line his index finger created led to Evelyn, who was dusting off bar tables in the distance. Her mouth grew sour as she was reminded that the room she would sleep in tonight was hers now and no longer his own, but continued on all the same. If she complained of it again, his chastise would be much harsher.

Reaching Evelyn, she stood at a generous distance behind her, until the blonde woman finally flipped around with wide blue eyes. She, too, broke into a smile at Aiyana, but quickly turned her sights to Ayan, far beneath her. Evelyn bent down, squeezing the cheeks of the young boy, who remained silent as he placed his hands on hers. She turned away as soon as her eyes fell upon the burn marks across the back of the older woman's neck, fracturing the line at which her gray-sprinkled hair began. Evelyn stood up again; Aiyana could feel her exhales hit the bridge of her nose.

"Here." She thrust forward the bag of cans to Evelyn's chest, only a heartbeat away from her own. "I got this for the Den." When Evelyn opened her mouth, she rushed to add, fearing Evelyn would fill up all the space in the room with words before Aiyana could supply any, "I know you said I didn't have to get anything. Because I'm new, and I have my baby. But it's because of y'all... *you*... that I could."

Evelyn's furrowed expression dropped as soon as Aiyana added, cupping her hands together and stealing the expression of abject concern Evelyn had just displayed, "Oh, Evelyn, the truth is I'm a kleptomaniac; this is my penance. Don't make me say it!" She jammed it into Evelyn's chest one more time, as if her hands would catch on fire were she to hold it any longer; her head drooped to her chest, as if she could no longer view her dirt-ridden paws. Evelyn immediately snatched the bag while tossing her head back in gruff laughter. "You damn kids!"

Evelyn walked further towards the kitchen for a few seconds, before turning back and dropping her head down to her knees in the most dramatic grand bow Aiyana had seen since witnessing professional theater in her distant youth. One hand drawn to her chest like a scoop, the other one stuck out at her side and to the sky, she declared, her head bobbing at each syllable, “Why, Ms. Keita, you are hereby abdicated.” Soon enough, she had disappeared further into the mall, likely wiping down tables still in the same schedule she maintained day after day.

Pursing her lips together to catch light chuckles still bursting through, Aiyana continued an internal roll call further into the mall with Ayan still by her side. There was Enoch, who wrote his memoir as usual at the light of a candle he dragged everywhere with him, and for some reason, Micaela, whose presence at Enoch’s scribbling shoulder immediately silenced and elicited a head tilt from Aiyana. Micaela jumped up and strolled over to Aiyana, leaving Enoch’s side and probably granting him the ability to finally unstiffen his shoulders to avoid touching her even one bit.

“Yana. Where the hell have you been, girl,” Micaela inquired, greeting Aiyana with a slap on the back that stole the wind from her lungs. After briefly keeling over, she bent upwards to look at her friend, jet black hair as fit for a bird’s nesting place as it always was. Could Micaela not have messaged her? Nevermind, no, because Aiyana’s holochip wasn’t even on her temple magnets, nor was her phone on her forearm magnets — she wouldn’t have caught the message anyways. Did she not register the keeling over? Ayan sure did, after all, hugging to his mother’s waist and abdomen, yet lacking even the tiniest of whimpers. But Micaela’s eyes were shifty, and the lollipop in her mouth clacked about her teeth with a fidgety precision, having only paused to grin at Aiyana. On second thought, she got it. Micaela had a job.

“Getting a little gift for the den,” Aiyana croaked, eyeing her. “Have you always been this heavy-handed?”

“Last time, you said I didn’t say hi.” Micaela’s words always came out in a smooth, delayed flow, as if each word was as viscous as honey; they could not be bothered to have any inflection.

“You didn’t say hi this t—” Aiyana began, before her throat denied her complaint access to her mouth and tongue. Did it even matter at this point? She was looking at a million things per minute. “What is it?”

Now, it became apparent to her, she was speaking Micaela’s language. She popped the lollipop past her lips and out of her mouth. “Tomorrow morning,” she began, and Aiyana anticipated the forever it would take her to finish, given her drawl. “Some cheap land-bastard on the Southside caught wind of me and how great I am. Says he has some metal for me to take care of. So, be ready. Tomorrow morning.”

Aiyana looked at Micaela’s eyes. She cracked another grin at Aiyana. “Deal’s a deal.” She then kneeled, scooping up the tiny child underneath his arms and throwing him securely onto her sturdy back. As was his custom, he did not whoop or holler, and began pulling at Micaela’s hair like stubborn weeds; only when she growled did he loosen the grip from his tiny hand, leaning forward and into her face to look at her with orange-width eyes.

Pivoting her head to the side, she muttered, “Little jackass. I’m not supposed to be cussing around you, though, so I get it.”

Aiyana inquired, “What did the man want you to fix?”

Micaela rolled Ayan off her shoulders and back onto the polished concrete floor. “Does it matter? The strap, the gat, the heat, the—”

“Aht aht,” Aiyana interjected. “Those aren’t actual parts. I ain’t stupid; you can at least tell me that much.” With where she was living, she needed to learn.

Micaela smiled a bit, before conceding, “Okay, okay. I stopped paying attention, because—”

“Because it wasn’t about you.” She nearly nodded her head off in the confirmation. Micaela was not one for listening, and it was yet another area where Aiyana served as the yin to her yang.

“Bingo. But it don’t matter; I have the parts because of you, so I can fix it. And you can do what you do. ‘Keep me company’.” She nudged Aiyana, who rolled her eyes again and again at each nudge. But even if it were a job anyone could do, she, too, needed to do *something*.

“I’ll be up at seven a.m. sharp.”

“Make it nine.”

Aiyana was quick to nod with this. You always, *always* made an absurd offer and let them fill in the rest. Swindler’s first trick. “... Nine sounds a lot better. And I’m wearing the vest this time. Already fixed up the outfit.”

“Unfair.”

“What’s unfair is you hogging it for two months.” Aiyana stood at attention for a moment, looking at Micaela as she looked back at her. They lifted their hands up, met in a momentary grasp, and she slid her hand away from Micaela, pink acrylic nails lingering at the gradient where Micaela’s tanned palms met her red rock skin. “... See ya.” Aiyana grabbed hold of Ayan’s hand, and they continued on once more.

Inside the pantry they reached, there was her makeshift bed with green sherpa comforter, her outfit laid to the side of it, and, strewn around, various computer parts she collected each and every time she went out. They devoured the tiny floor space there was in the pantry, and when she and her baby slept, they slept encased by a U-shaped, Wall-of-Jericho-replica made entirely of computer chips, old monitors, hard drives, keyboards, and mice (Micaela always claimed mice was the literal species in this case, given all the clutter, but what did she know). It was cozy beyond belief, and kept her and her baby warmed up even when the cold crept through. Besides, she was always woken up by Ayan typing surprisingly meticulously on the keyboard, her own personal alarm clock.

Less smoothly than Micaela, she lifted her son into the air, and then swooped him back down onto the mattress pad below, pulling the comforter over his body. Ayan always watched her as she tucked him in, but halfway through, he threw his head over to the right side, and at a gentle whisper, spoke, “Goodnight, Daddy.” His breath condensed on the ultra-thin monitor beside him, and Aiyana pulled up and away from him, halting her tucking. His long eyelashes fell onto his cheeks, and he whispered, “Goodnight, Mommy.”

To the right side, at a whisper, the words. It was an every night happening, and as one would expect, she had never gotten used to it. First, when she entered the space, she had placed a moderate-sized

frame picture of him hanging up above that monitor, her favorite of him, and him alone. With cloudy cauliflower hair the color of wet bark, he danced in and out of an overcast of draping willow branches, a smile plastered on his face for the duration of the live photo before it repeated again and again, every few seconds a bitter reinstatement of the unbridgeable nature of then and now. Somewhere along the way, she had taken to removing it periodically, and it always seemed to end up back up there when she lost her composure. She had decided at some point that a picture of the whole family was fair game, enough of a vague tribute for him to be satisfied wherever he was. For now, the portrait itself was gone, but Ayan never seemed to forget where his father slept.

When his nose came to a soft whistle, Aiyana reached beyond him and behind one of the bulkiest monitors she had, pulling out the frame she had. Then, to her left, she stood up and fumbled with placing the handle back on the pushpin it rightfully belonged on. He would sleep over them tonight. “Goodnight, Montraie.” Even if she held her baby a bit too tight, he didn’t cry in the night the way she did.

Much to her chagrin, she was not woken up by Ayan’s click-clacks on the keyboard, although they were plenty loud as she sat up to Micaela standing over her.

“It’s like nine fifteen. I didn’t tell him we were coming ‘till around noon, so good timing.” Surprisingly, the wild woman was all ready to go, halter top, overly-belted skirt that was definitely Aiyana’s although she couldn’t prove it, and gogo boots. Although their color schemes varied significantly, Micaela gravitating towards neutrals where Aiyana always chose vibrant primaries, they always seemed to match, and Aiyana eyed the outfit she had picked out to confirm this.

“Who’s this?” She had leaned over to the left and placed her index right on his nose.

“Ayan’s father.” She wiped the crusties out of her eyes and looked up at Micaela, whose face was contorted some sort of way.

“Oh yeah? Remind me, why isn’t he raising his brat?” She was grilling him down at this point.

“Again, I dunno. I’m not sure where he is.” Aiyana cupped her hand to her face and exhaled through her mouth, taking a generous whiff before instantaneously regretting it. Gross.

Micaela's voice adapted a lighter tone as she remarked, "Look at that big grin, huh? I bet he was a little nerd like you. Into all the computers you collect. Same quirks and stuff. That's how y'all met, huh? How sweet."

In spite of the lingering smell of her unpleasant breath, Aiyana broke into a smile. "That's what he loved. More than me. More than anyone in the world, I bet."

"I bet that motherfucker blew himself up into a million pieces and is floating in a cardboard box down the swamp."

Aiyana's head flipped up to look at Micaela, mouth hanging agape. Micaela turned away from the portrait and looked at her, blank-faced. A staring contest pursued, Aiyana's utter shock placing her at a significant disadvantage, her eyebrows squeezing the bridge of her nose and eyes to slits.

"How could you say that?" Her voice splashed out with a fiery vitriol flavoring, but Micaela kept her knees locked.

In a deadlock like this, how could she hold it anymore? Aiyana had held it for too long, and as soon as her eyebrows shifted back to neutral, she promptly burst out laughing.

"How could you say that? The hell is wrong with you?" She fell forward, gripping her stomach tightly as it fell ravaged with the shakes giggles brought. "You can't just say that to people!" Her every word was invaded by an uncontrollable cackle.

Micaela's blank expression gradually cracked open into a half-smile as she watched Aiyana's continued laughter. "... Just saying."

Aiyana lifted herself up off the mattress pad, pushing her microlocs out of her face as she stretched as widely as the room permitted. "Alright. I'm getting ready then; give me a second."

"Sure. I'll take the brat to get breakfast." His click-clacks seized, and Micaela delivered one snap with her fingers. "C'mon, kid! Time to eat." As per usual, Aiyana noted, he was already dressed. Ready before she could even wake up in the morning. Her eyes followed him as Micaela guided him out of the room until the door finally closed shut, a gentle smile on her face.

Aiyana left the pantry fully lotioned and dressed by nine forty-five; somehow, even in the early morning bustle, she had managed to snag an open shower stall within ten minutes. The den was cacophonous in the morning, and even if she tried to keep to herself, bumping shoulders in the morning was inevitable. She traversed large halls under the awning of thick walkways above her head and thick white pillars of stone reached up like arms lifting from the ground up to hold them all. Folks strolled through, conversing in a manner that was never quiet, never holding themselves to a volume low enough, all while laden in overalls, t-shirts, bandanas, and work boots of blues, beiges, and browns, not yet dirtied by the work that was to come that day. If they were younger men, it was not too uncommon for them to rough house one another, meaning that her eye never came to trust what was in her peripheral vision. When they did bump into her, they were quick to apologize, and were gone just as quickly. This was not an area of stagnancy; nothing here stayed for very long without purpose.

Beyond the pillars and the walkway she herself was on, she watched as several constructed colorful wooden and plastic booths rose up into the air with signs atop, those who were not going into northside or Midtown that day setting up whatever they had scavenged or made the days before. Closest to her closet and on her left side she had walked past the gardener's storefront first, which always had the aroma of topsoil and brought dirt to her shoes if she was not careful to wipe her feet after she walked on by. There it was very busy, as several Folksmen shuffled in plants, wheelbarrows, gardening tools, and meager puddles of water from outside in and inside out, the door they mostly left ajar during the day (even if Evelyn had told them not to) being a main source of morning sun pouring into the Den aside from the glass ceiling above.

Through the corridor and on the far side from the gardener's storefront and the walkway she was on sat the one-room school, which had been a large storefront now fixed up just for Gueneverie, the only teacher in the Den, to instruct their youth. For some reason, it was right next to the hunter's guild, which was right next to the gunsmiths and the mechanics. The whole situation of the school was an oddity, because not only was Gueneverie one of the newest Folksmen like her, but she was young and black and the only woman in there with a doctorate's degree; yes, a doctorate's. How she had ended up here?

Aiyana was none the wiser, but Gueneverie had taught so many to read that it wasn't a single person's place to question. The schoolroom was also particularly large because Gueneverie needed enough space to keep the age groups as separate as possible, and as they were all under one roof, she only had one or two women to teach the younger children when she was lucky, and otherwise she was forced to run back and forth between four sections, trying to make sure she projected the right image from her holochip onto the right section of the wall for the right children to see. Ayan was in her youngest cohort.

Between the pillars were women that folded large sheets and let them fall onto the table — those were the tailors — and on her left, to the far end of the Den, gates clattered open to make room for the various workshops there were for those who did not operate individual stands; for example, there were the carpenters, who operated in one large storefront, and delved out general assignments that came into their shop on an individual basis. Most of the carpenters, like Rome, left in the morning and touched base here as soon as they were back. Right after them she passed the barbershop storefront, which saw its greatest outcomes on the weekend. There was even a tailor storefront, which had desks for the tailors that took more individual commissions than they did sell their premade crafts; this shop was the most beautiful of all because of the rich drapes that covered the shop from head to toe, rich in embroidery and beads and pearls, ready to be made into a sundress or romper for those looking to impress their Folksmen beau.

Luckily she and Micaela were not in a terrible rush, because each and every day about half of the 400 residents of the Folksmen's Den departed before noon, most well before nine o'clock in the morning, and many even before six in the morning to pursue varied hustles. They worked until their backs had curled up, the bags under their eyes weighed heavy on their cheeks, and their arms hung low with the little money they had made working for fifteen or more hours a day. Their return in the evenings resembled that of an indie zombie apocalypse film, yet their earnings were hardly enough to keep the Den afloat. None of their jobs were ever human jobs within the Enterprise, for there were none left. Bartering was the only way most citizens could truly double the pocket change compensation everyone received from the Enterprise monthly so that maybe, just maybe, they could afford having a piece of meat beside their gruel. Deep was the smell of the fresh bread and oatmeal and grits in the entire Den, once you got

past the soil and the few soap making booths. This, too, was a storefront, full of grills and sinks and fridges to somehow feed the mass of people to which it had been assigned. They made three square meals a day, and the U-shape of the space made it easy for the Folksmen to shuffle through the kitchen and get all that they needed to fill them: no more than two plates, no matter what. If you wanted to eat more, you could buy your own damn mini-fridge with a padlock and stick it right next to your bunk bed.

It was a late morning for many of the younger residents, and Aiyana plotted herself at a large, round, and full table in the grand corridor beside her baby and Micaela, who chatted with several other twenty-somethings. She tensed up as her ceramic plate made a tiny clank on the chestnut table as soon as she slid her nails from under it, which drew attention from a few others. It first appeared that many had already eaten, but she released her shoulders, noticing Micaela's plate, half-touched, still sitting at the table beside her own. Maybe they had not looked at all.

The conversations at the table followed a formula she had started to recognize with time, with scattered discussions her attention jumped around to. After a moment, Milo pointed at her. The table was the clock face, he was the hands and they the numbers; everyone got pointed towards at least once a day, every day. Aiyana had nearly missed her cue.

"How much was *your* scrape check?" Milo asked, because he could never mind his damn business, anyways. Not that it mattered. She would tell him as soon as she was done chewing on the little bits of rabbit cutlet on her plate.

"Four thousand. And it'll be half gone today," she said without a glance at her left forearm, where her just-a-little-more-than-paper-thin phone rested snug, in tune to the curvature of her limb. Although she received more than them due to having a child, the checks never lasted too long, and if she had her holochip on her temple, it was sure to ring in her ear each time a hundred dollars were taken because she had dared crave a snack while near southside. It was easier on the mind, even if she did miss the unending cascade of information, information she couldn't bear to miss, no matter how much she chose to not care.

"Cool, cool," Milo responded, always seeming to say things first to sway her and secondly, likely himself. "I got about half of that. ... And I lost half of it, too. Gotta stretch that about a *month* long."

“Shit, if you want a good supply of water, that’s about like… five hundred, seven hundred…” Austin said, his eyes unwaveringly focused on the table grain underneath sheets of curtained blonde hair. It seemed he knew the price of just about anything, especially unusual for a trust fund baby. “But don’t worry, Milo. We’ll flip it, unlike Mr. Moral Man over here.”

As he gestured towards Rome, his fork fell out of his hand and onto the plate as he looked up towards Austin. “I’m a single man, after all. How much could I need.”

It hadn’t really seemed a question, especially clear with Mr. Moral Man’s deadpan inflection, but Austin answered all the same. “As much as you can take back from the man!”

“Is the man you?” Rome retorted, prompting a guffaw from Austin. “I’ll be fine though. I’ve got some good jobs coming up, no gambling required. I’ve got all the food and warmth I need here, and some folks are going to give me batteries if I fix up a few things around their places come this week.”

Aiyana looked at Milo just long enough to watch him shoo away at Rome limply with his right hand, but her eyes fell back to Rome as he took up his fork and began eating again.

As soon as Hasil finished cutting and gently placing morsels of food on his tongue, his hand fell back to his gun and lifted it onto his lap, whipping out a handkerchief to wipe at its already clean comb. The comb, Aiyana repeated. “Thanks to you,” he started, Micaela nodding to receive her praises, “My…” his voice lingered on the word and his eyes left the gun to look directly at Aiyana.

“Comb,” Aiyana spoke, unwavering in her role.

He blasted a finger gun at her in approval before continuing his methodical wiping. “My comb is fixed now. I can go hunting again.”

Certainly like all those at the table, Aiyana’s mouth filled with seeping saliva. Ever since she came to the Folksmen, she hadn’t eaten meat unless it came from the hands of men like Hasil or women like Jaid, freshly hunted from invasive species in the land. You could never trust the printed meat in the stores enough, Jaid had told her. Too many people were missing without a trace to eat it without a double-take.

More meat for everyone, but especially for herself and Micaela. Micaela because she fixed his precious gun, and for Aiyana just because. Maybe because she was attached to Micaela at the hip, or maybe because she had a baby and no true way to barter. Even with computer parts stacked to the ceiling in her pantry, they were worth nothing, as technology had long surpassed the need for inflexible monitors and hard drives. It was during her great-grandparents' time, and long before the twenty-second century that they were phased out in favor of foldable tech. Even if Aiyana squeezed up her near-paper-thin phone into a crumbled up wad, it always unfolded the same, but the tech of old was firm and constant in its physicality, which led her to miss it all the more.

Milo inquired, "Hunting what? I'm tired of this gruel."

Hasil shrugged and turned his head to Jaid, who answered, "I don't know. I haven't gone. Hence the slop; it's just rabbit. I haven't seen anything else." When everyone's heads remained turned towards her direction, Jaid sighed and tapped her holochip. The beam it shot out hit the western wall and the light painted the drywall into an image of an emphatic man, his orotund voice filling the entire room.

"Sorry, wrong channel, I meant the news," she quickly mused, but was stopped by Hasil's hand on her wrist before she could tap once more.

The wonder which lay in all of their eyes. She looked from Hasil to Milo and Milo to Austin. As soon as the man opened his mouth, spread his arms out wide. He boomed, "...Honeybees? Inefficient! How about drone fairies? More honey for you and me, *and* we're saving the trees!" ... What damn trees were there left to save? If you walked outside right now, there were no trees or flowers or anything else a honeybee would give a damn to land on until you were right up against the entrance to Midtown, which was flanked with a modest amount of trees. When you actually entered Midtown, it became all metal shacks stacked on metal shacks next to skyscrapers. The flower that dared to bloom through the Midtown concrete, especially with all those bodies shuffling about, might be a fool simply for trying. It was all she needed to stop listening, but those three men stayed locked into the hands he waved, those hands she had touched long ago. The hands of Aron Front.

Because she had already shot the screen onto the wall, her job was done and Jaid gathered her things to go. There would be no more discussions of meat, as long as Aron Front saw fit to talk. She scooped the rest of her plate into her mouth and, after a quick side glance to Rome, who promptly got up and walked away, left.

Aiyana slapped Micaela on the thigh, cutting off her conversation with Niamh, a beekeeper and tailor to her right whose face grew sterner and sterner as Aron Front spoke. "Time to go." As Micaela immediately jumped into gear to deposit their three dishes in the cafeteria, Aiyana headed to Gueneverie, who had already begun guiding the Folksmen's children into the school on the far side of the grand corridor by a light touch of her waifish hands on the kitchen of their heads. She walked Ayan to the storefront before releasing his hand; he froze briefly before joining the modest crowd of children.

"Got my toolbox!" Micaela exclaimed, holding the black tackle box over her head triumphantly. It was large and full of metal; she was strong enough to keep it floating above her head. Aiyana quickly joined her, the two traversing through the great corridor to the gate that gave way to an arid earth nearing noon time.

By the time they reached the Anacitas mansion, Micaela's gogo boots were already covered in a generous coating of red clay several inches high as if silt had swam past her calves. Aiyana's heels were less so, but being free of hands allowed her to dust off her soles and umber skin in the canoe to the southside. It was a luxury Micaela's toolbox didn't afford her, because she wouldn't release it from her hands, her lap, held close to her bosom unless someone wrenched it from her.

The mansion sat in the oddest spot, where it was kind of a part of Midtown, kind of towards the southside, but was too far East to fundamentally be either. It felt as if someone had built it there just so they could gaslight their conversational partner about what side of Onyx Front it was on, and stuck out in a particular way because of its large perimeter cream stucco walls all across with terracotta, mediterranean-styled entablatures atop them. In the middle sat a great gate, easily six times their height, with two great doors of engraved brass and bronze that even the strongest of men could not have swung open of their own strength. On that door were three great gray-black spheres with a red beam that shone

down upon the two of them; beyond that, each was encased in a white diamond-shaped painting, and there were three of these, one at eye level with the two of them. God, this was a weird place. Undusted boots and all, Micaela leaned into the closest door camera. The screen of the eye lit up, the silence of its black warming to a gentle blue. Its gradient drifted across the screen as it looked the two women up and down.

“Hello, I am C20. State your name and purpose,” it ordered.

“Micaela Montaña. Mee-Kai-Eh-La.”

“And Aiyana!” She peeked from beyond Micaela’s shoulder.

The screen bloomed into a gentle sakura pink. “Micaela Montaña. You are currently scheduled within the Anacitas’ Thursday itinerary. Anacitas does not mind their guests bringing one, (1) additional guest. “Aiyana” is your additional guest.”

After Micaela nodded at the screen, it transitioned to a warm grass green. “Welcome, Micaela. Welcome, Aiyana.” The double doors slid into the stone walls on either side of themselves, revealing a grand garden of japanese honeysuckles, weeping lovegrass, and autumn olives. A waffle-like structure of small square gardens encased the plants, and concrete cells kept them apart from one another. On either side of the walkway leading up to the lightly kudzu-covered house were what Aiyana immediately pinged as a green carpet of fake grass beckoning them. Picturesque enough to make the stomach churn.

Walking past all of this with a quickness, the two stepped foot on the first of several porch steps before a Blue had beat them to the mansion’s front door, standing at the entrance like a true hostess.

“Hello,” she greeted, her white irises making staggered adjustments from Micaela to the other and back, never suave enough, “We met at the door. I am C20, and I work for the Anacitas estate.”

Micaela huffed, but Aiyana opted instead to bow. “It’s nice to meet you, C20. I’m Aiyana. I’m Micaela’s friend and business partner.” She remained, half-bowed, eyes looking straight up through her chunky bangs. Waiting, waiting for a mimicked bow that would never come. C20’s blank slate eyes would probably burn holes into the back of her head had she given them time to. She straightened up again. Go figure.

A plastered-on smile preceded squinted-up eyes. “Hello, Aiyana. Hello, Micaela. I see your shoes are unclean.” With this, C20 stretched out her arm and a compartment opened, from which several smooth silicone bits dissolved and fell onto the stone pavement beneath them before Micaela could finish the beginnings of a rejection. In a moment’s time, the bits came together to form four small, fluid bots, Aiyana’s clunkier than the ones that rushed to Micaela’s feet, scaling her boots and scraping off the dust with precision. Pigeon-toed, she observed in silence as her shoes were wiped sparkly clean, until some of the shoe polish she had put on in tougher times had been scraped from the heel toe. When the bots had finished, C20 extended the material of her arm to the piles the bots dissolved back into with their task’s completion, becoming whole once more.

Micaela clicked her boots together as if she were Dorothy. “... Okay, nice. Southside always has something *extra* stupid going on.”

“Ehh, I kind of like it,” Aiyana remarked. Montraie would flip his lid if he saw the smoothness of the nanocells. They were much better than the junk metal, stiff robots movie directors had imagined some centuries ago. She wished she had tapped her temple just fast enough that C20 could not have seen her begin recording through her downturned eyes at that moment, but she didn’t. It was something wrong, they said. Taking pictures of someone’s Blue like that. Just the right hacker could jailbreak one from something simple as a few pixels gathered together.

“Now, you can enter.” The double doors of the true entrance opened at C20’s command, and in the middle stood a shorter, dark woman and a pudgier man not unlike her in a house too big, white, and especially white. He immediately gaped a grin upon seeing Micaela, and held a smile just as large for his unexpected guest.

“Micaela! Aiyana!” His hands immediately scooped into a come hither, beckoning the two to enter, who obliged. The double doors closed sharply behind them.

Mr. Anacitas began walking them through the house with large steps Aiyana struggled to keep pace with and Micaela less so. His voice echoed through the home and ricocheted off ceilings that

reached to the heavens. From the floor to ceiling windows that extended across the house the whole estate was visible, its concrete gardens filled with foreign flora.

“Now, I was going hunting the other day,” he began, his hand stretching up to gesture toward a line of sun-bleached, taxidermied red wolf heads lining the wall, as if the white stone walls had sucked all the color from the coats. “And a particular buck startled me. I dropped the shotgun and the display on the pump is all sorts of messed up.”

After a minute or two of walking through expansive corridors not too unlike the shopping mall Micaela and Aiyana called home, Mr. Anacitas finally planted his feet in a great room and picked up a semi-automatic shotgun. Immediately as it was held, the holographic display on the fore-end began breaking into multicolored fractals, distorting the information it would otherwise display. Micaela exhaled a sharp whistle as she set her toolbox down and Mr. Anacitas handed her the gun, throttling it gently as if it were a newborn. “Can’t even read the number of mags in that thing,” she remarked, her voice trailing off as she flipped the shotgun once, twice, and tapped at the hologram. It bent into fractured symbols about her index.

“It’s not loaded,” he stated. Micaela looked away from the gun and met his eye.

Now that the conversation had started to bore her in its brief thirty seconds, Aiyana spun on her recently-shined heel toe and began pacing in tiny steps throughout the hall, the sound of the conversation gliding in and out as she completed her trip in a straight line again and again. After he and Micaela had entered further into the room, her toolbox cracked open and parts spread across the marble floors, the sound of their gun talk exited her presence entirely. Instantly it was replaced by a distant buzzing.

She did not complete her next trip. Instead, she ceased to walk entirely, her head flipping over to an ebony hall table on her right side. In fact, she stopped mid-step, foot still hanging almost to the ground, but not quite in contact. For atop the hall table, its yellow runner began swirling. Like an invisible mixer in a bowl full of meringue. Like a fabric hurricane. Like a screw in some plywood. All around her, no one was looking. Not Micaela or Mr. Anacitas, and not the woman beside him that no one had bothered to

introduce, oddly enough. Not even C20 was watching her. With that being said, she stepped to the table, spreading out the sun-shaped spiral of the runner into its rectangular form.

In the middle sat two silicone wings on a miniscule long body, thin as could be. It couldn't be larger than her pinky nail, and she placed it to the buzzer's side to confirm this. Her lower jaw unhinged from her skull. Without a moment's thought, her hand was tightly cupped around the little buzzer, which let out a last great vibration and then her hand was in her vest pocket. Just like that. Mouth closed. Next trip began.

When she had completed her second linear trip after starting again, a wail ripped through the halls and vibrated on the marble floors, running up through her feet and out the top of her skull. She halted briefly, shook out the shivers from her hands as much as she could, and stepped towards the room to peep in.

Micaela's torso was pinned to the marble floors, her boots kicking into the air on occasion as C20 ground her knee into Micaela's back. Thrashing her head to the side, her eye eventually met Aiyana, and she then shouted, "Get this Blue off my back! Those idiots aren't doing a damn thing, and it's theirs!"

True to her words, when entering the two individuals stood to the side, watching in differing stages of horror. With open palms, Mr. Anacitas shouted, "Stop that, C20!"

"There is an unrecognized weapon being held by Micaela Montaña. This weapon is not registered in my database or any other database in the cloud, and therefore Micaela Montaña must legally be detained."

"What?!" Micaela shouted, her voice growing breathy. "Listen to your boss!"

"I am beholden first to the will of the greater people."

Aiyana walked to C20 and knelt down, seeing Micaela's hands drawn tightly together and shoved against the small of her back, where C20 clamped them into place there with an iron grip. Underneath Micaela was the gun, newly fitted, the just repaired pump buzzing like crazy as her breasts pushed up against its display and selected millions of options all at once. She dared not touch the Blue, but Aiyana stuck her left hand between Micaela and the gun, granting her a tiny pocket of space.

Her lips did not want to part. Her jaw did not want to move. She could have stayed like that forever, in an act of convenient ignorance, but as Micaela's breath grew ragged, so did her heart pang with a newfound pain that would not go away otherwise. *Speak. Fix this.* There was no need to scan the room for who was speaking. All were silent, except her.

She wrenched her lips ajar. "Did you not tell C20 that the gun would be altered?" In due time, Micaela's chest began expanding in and out. Good.

His hands fell to his sides. "I... I didn't think it would be a problem. I thought she would know."

Forcing words out. "... How would she know? You must have never taught her to know that."

Micaela began to fidget a great deal. "Yana, pull her up off me."

Abiding this, Aiyana's left hand slid from under Micaela, and her right hand rose to C20's neck. As it did, C20's arm gained a soft consistency, wrapping around her left hand and pinning it to the floor. Her heart leaped, but she could not and would not tug away, enraptured in full cognitive battle with her gut. Instead, she focused on her gently trembling right hand, which she pulled up, up, up, with precise movements, until she finally arrived where the shoulders and the neck met on the Blue's spine.

"Yana... still... can't... breathe..." Micaela pushed out with the little air she had.

In a few rushed motions, Aiyana pointed her fingers into a single file line at the neck, moved them up to the brain stem, and then threw her hand forward rapidly, dragging upon the neck and then past the face of C20.

From the eyes of C20 and following the sweeping hand of Aiyana burst a prism of vibrant holograms extending in a close semicircle across the Blue's field of vision. C20 released her grip on Aiyana's hand, and when Aiyana stood up, she followed, granting Micaela fresh air she did not waste in generous gasps.

Now that the Blue stood to the side of Micaela, Aiyana circled around to the front of her, reading the copious amount of code spreading from one end to the other within each square hologram in tiny lettering. "Compartmentalize," she ordered; the holograms sorted themselves into various functions.

Squinting, she picked through the code, pushing holograms one way and the other until she pinpointed a specific pink square box.

“... If you’d told her, it probably would’ve been in here. Now, I’m not going to go and sort through her entire neural network,” she tapped the hologram, which extended a digitalized keyboard to her, “But I think it’s obvious that there isn’t enough security in place to prevent this from happening again.” She began typing slowly, occasionally backspacing and entering to refine what she coded.

“How?” Had Micaela ever sounded so lost? She sat on the floor, resting on spread out knees. Her mouth held ajar; scanning the room, she was not the only one, with the exception of the woman by Mr. Anacitas' side.

“... It’s like a... temporal parts comprehension issue.” Aiyana nodded at Micaela, at Mr. Anacitas, and continued to type in the resounding silence. It maintained itself for the twenty minutes at which she tapped away, even as the unnamed woman inched closer to her side, watching Aiyana as she worked, until she finally brought her hands together into a prayer and all the holograms joined into one point and reabsorbed into C20’s eyes.

C20’s arms remained in a penguin pose for a few more seconds, until she suddenly gained motion once more, announcing, “Hello, I am C20.”

Aiyana’s eyes fell to the gun, and then to Micaela. She shook her head; Aiyana kept eye contact. Before long, Micaela slowly and warily lifted the gun to C20’s eyes.

C20 did not speak. Instead, she scanned her. Scanned the gun. Scanned the room.

“Micaela, is there something you would like for me to do with Anacitas’ shotgun?”

Micaela nearly dropped the gun, but caught it at the last minute as Aiyana huffed a great sigh and released her shoulders. “Thank the Lord God.”

The woman stepped away, and Mr. Anacitas took her place near Aiyana. “So is that never going to happen again? With anything?”

Aiyana shrugged. “I dunno. Didn’t really test it. Neither did you.” Then, to Micaela, “Did he pay you yet?”

Micaela stood, uncharacteristically silent. She shook her head again.

“We’re going to need you to double it too, sir. On account of... well, you know.” She moved to Micaela and patted the arch of her back.

Snapping out of a trance, Mr. Anacitas nodded vigorously. “Absolutely! C20, transfer four thousand—”

At that moment, the woman clutched at the arm of Mr. Anacitas; he fell silent.

“What if we double nothing? We asked her to do a job, she did the job. We could throw a hundred on the side as an apology for C20’s behavior, but another couple thousand is ridiculous. Are we paying for your labor, too?” Her eyes were sharp and pointed.

“Who said anything about my labor? Were we not transferring the funds from Mr. Anacitas to Micaela? Where do I come in?”

“You insisted we double it, but for whose labor? Do you not perform your labor at a cost? Could you not use the money?”

What a head scratcher. It was true; if she were to tap her holochip, she would see just how broke she was. But money came and went. Yes, she was broke, but that’s how she always was, and she got by because the people around her did, as well. She couldn’t fret less about this.

“If you’re so worried about it, then I’m fine. But you’ll at least add on a few hundred for Micaela’s troubles, or I’ll smash out your pump’s display again.”

A deadlock ensued. The woman’s eyes on Aiyana’s. Furrowed brows maintained a distended heaviness in the air, only broken by the phone chime from Micaela’s account flooding with cash. As soon as it did, Micaela’s back curled as she huffed out a sigh of relief.

Aiyana’s eyes shifted solely to her. “Check it.”

“Nah,” she began as she straightened up, flicking her hands to the side as if shaking off water from them. “I don’t wanna know, I don’t wanna care anymore. I’m trying to get out of here! This is freaky.”

“Sounds good.” Aiyana led the five-body long line that accumulated to exit the room, Micaela by her tail and followed by C20, whose calls for any desired assistance went ignored, Mr. Anacitas, and finally, the woman. She kept up pace with the buzzing in her pocket until she was led down and out of the double doors and C20 stopped at the edge of the porch. Aiyana turned back and eyed her feet. There was probably the Blue equivalent of a shock collar coded in her, so she would stop just right here.

“Thank you for your visit!” The Blue looked almost as if she could step beyond, but didn’t. Bingo. “Please come back sometime soon.”

Micaela kicked at the fake grass. “I won’t.”

Still on the porch stood Mr. Anacitas and the woman, close as if their feet were knotted together. A tranquil sort of watching.

It was not until after they had disembarked from the canoe that Micaela finally decided to say something, even though Aiyana had patiently kept her conversation short in anticipation of the interruption. The clay began painting a mark of itself on their shoes as they trotted back to the mall.

“... So you weren’t going to tell me that?” More important than the ground, Micaela’s head was cocked to the side, away from her, and her left hand rested atop an imaginary pocket.

“Tell you what?”

She swung the toolbox in the air and above her head in a huff, causing the doohickeys inside to rattle loudly. “That you could do all that! Aiyana, I’ve never seen anything like that before. Definitely not from no one on Northside. I can’t believe you! I thought those computers were a collector hobby of yours. I mean, you’re actually a genius!”

“... It’s not that hard.” She kicked through pebbles beneath her feet, seeing that Micaela had come to a complete stop. “Nothing special. You could learn it.”

“No the hell I couldn’t! I’ve never met anyone who could do that before! That... that’s different. Extra different.” ...Whatever. Micaela wasn’t going to distract her from the pebbles, let alone get a peep out of her.

“Super different.” Micaela’s eyes were boring two growing holes into the side of her head, now. “... Where’d you learn to do all that?”

When she didn’t speak for some time, Micaela added onto the plate of questions she was serving to Aiyana, “You can do so much more, huh? So much more than that.”

Aiyana stuck her hands out. The nails were still shiny, not too chipped yet. She was glad she had spent a little time as a dropout learning some sort of skill. She flipped to her palms. They needed a little extra love, a little dollop of shea butter so the sensation didn’t bother her when she rubbed her fingers on them.

Micaela echoed, “You can do so much more than that. You could flip the world upside down. No, right-side up again.”

Her arms fell right back at her sides. “I’m not a hero or a star. I can’t just do anything I want. Even if you want to. It’s not going to work. And that’s how you end up missing. That’s how you end up as ground beef in some private prison. Let’s play our parts.”

“*Boring*,” Micaela droned, drawing it out long and loud in Aiyana’s ear. “And wack. If you’re not at risk of going missing, what’s the point?”

Still nearly walking on top of her, Micaela asked, “So, what’d you get this time?”

It spun in her pocket. Her eyes remained straight ahead, even if Micaela was jabbing her nose into Aiyana’s cheek because she was so close. “*I never steal.*” Her head sashayed with the assertion.

Micaela’s eyes narrowed, before she shouted in a crescendo, “Shut up! What did you get?”

Aiyana pushed her foot from the ground and began to run. A sprint that garnered a, “Hey!” from Micaela when it had taken her a hundred feet away.

However, it was no longer than a half-minute before Micaela’s shadow overcast her as she bent down gasping for breath.

“I was in track for seven years, you idiot.” She swung the toolbox off her shoulder and let it hang beside her calf once more. “Even with me carrying all this, you didn’t have a chance. Nerd.”

Aiyana straightened up and cracked her back. “Girl, whatever. Guess there’s no point, then.” Reaching into her pocket, she uncurled the microbot from the spiral of fabric it spun up in her pocket.

Almost in a scream, Micaela inquired, “What? What’s that?” Her eyesight poured into Aiyana’s right hand.

“Compensation for my hard labor.” She placed the microbot in Micaela’s hand, where it fluttered about in sporadic bursts. “That’s why I didn’t ask you for a single coin all this time, although I deserve it for how much you annoy me.”

“*That’s* all you got?” Micaela, her face gradually having scrunched up the more the microbot moved, replaced it back in Aiyana’s hand.

Aiyana set the microbot right back in her pocket. “You wouldn’t get it. That thing might be worth more than any painting in that house. Even if I couldn’t trade it in the Den for anything.”

Sulking now, she scowled at Aiyana. “You say ‘compensation for your work’, but you were never going to ask me for even a dollar of anything he sent me today. And all you got was this stupid ass housefly.”

“Don’t care. I’m just going to steal goods from you, anyways.” When she got no response, not even a smirk out of Micaela, Aiyana began to cackle. “Just kidding!”

“They should have paid you.”

A huff. “Don’t care.”

“You should have done something.”

Now it was Micaela’s turn to kick at pebbles. “... There aren’t many people in the world that can do whatever you just did, Yana, and I’m just saying. I’m cool and all, but lots of people can do what I do. Blues run the world, and if *you* could control that, well.”

There was no value to any words she contemplated saying, for none of them could make Micaela see. Just the mention of such “power” rendered on her skin as a hand restricting her throat, pressing into her windpipe to violently expel the air from her lungs. There was only the illusion of choice, of control. It would be like a marionette playing with a finger puppet.

“You should do something. Yana.”

Their walk concluded in silence.

Gifts of Fire

The pair arrived home ten after three, with Aiyana immediately scooping up Ayan from his day in the makeshift school towards the back of the Den. Soon after, the pair split without another word to each other. Rather than devoting some to Micaela, Aiyana instead dedicated her energy in those next two hours to rejuvenating her son from the draining day he had had, she was sure, through games of Sudoku he solved in rapid succession, ensuring to her that she would have to buy yet another book of the puzzles for the second time this year. It was not the learning that drained him — in fact, her worry was that the time he had before aging out of Gueneverie’s one-room school drew near — but the social interaction, and by three she had to get him in the quietest section of the Den.

Truthfully, only the night yielded to silence in the Folksmen’s Den and there was not much quiet, because as early as six am some tabletop markets would be open, by nine they hustled around the dining tables being used for breakfast. At noon it became hectic, because those who had left early in the morning to do the little work they could in the city would come back by then to sell, barter, buy and haggle with the little that they had earned, and at three it was the loudest. Dinner allowed things to simmer down, but it wasn’t until nine that all the vendors had finally cleared from the grand corridor. The Folksmen’s Den was always loud, always busy, inducing what felt to be constant sensory overload.

It was at six that the kitchen sent a pulse that rang so strong it shook the entire mall, alerting anyone on the three separate floors to come to dinner. Ayan froze as soon as it rang, prompting Aiyana to stand from the barstool and lead him by the hand to a table where the children sat and played amongst themselves, planting a kiss on his cheek before separating to grab a plate for him, full of greens. She was lucky he never seemed to complain about them, because you were only allowed one or two chunks of rabbit meat on any given day, perhaps three on a holiday if the Den was actually thriving — it never

really was. Looping back around in line to grab her own plate, by the time she reached her table of twenty-somethings she was the last to arrive.

Most had just begun to eat, but as soon as they were freshly settled on the chairs Milo immediately shouted, “So... the budget report!” at Austin, who served as one of the three accountants for the Folksmen’s Den. He was one of the few who had gone to actual schools and even a university. A bit of goodwill, likely coupled with a lot of heavy fear of the armed populace within the Folksmen’s Den, made him a reliable choice to do their bookkeeping.

Halfway into a bite of meat, he muttered, “... Can I eat?”

“No.”

He dropped his fork down on his plate from an elevated stance, causing Gueneverie, on the left side of Aiyana, to flinch in her seat slightly, and swirled his tongue around in his closed mouth. Milo seemed unfazed, and this was likely because Austin never seemed to stay angry long enough for it to matter. “I have nothing new to report. Money’s still tight. Everyone contributes and has whatever trades they do, and it helps, but even then we’re constantly outpaced by Blues. We might have to cut the rations. Roll back how long people are allowed to shower, restrict everyone to hand washing their clothes. Probably no more A/C, really. We’ll probably ask people to work even more than they already do, somehow. Find some way to scavenge some pocket change.”

The table fell to a grim silence. Gueneverie, who seemed to keep notes on the situation despite her general aloofness, asked, “What about the property taxes? Could we fix that?”

Austin looked at her before dropping his head back towards his plate and chuckling. “Even if the mall isn’t in use, some man conveniently remembered he owns the land as soon as he got wind of us and hiked the purchasing price up a ridiculous amount. To put it quite plainly, we’re all squatters turned renters. They do it any time they spot squatters on some land they forgot about decades ago.”

Milo shook his head and remarked, “Damn smart strategy if we weren’t on the other side of the fence.”

Ready to bat, Niamh remarked with no bark and all bite, “No, it’s *cruel*. Just cruel that anyone could do this to people like us, or anyone.”

“Don’t lump me in with ‘people like you’,” he mocked. “What do you know? You’re nineteen. Anyways, Austin, did you try striking a deal with them? We need to *buy* this land. Did you try convincing them to sell to us, or negotiating a lower rent price? A DPA, maybe?”

He chuckled again. “Striking a deal with who? The Blue?”

Aiyana’s stomach rumbled. “They made you talk to a Blue?” It was a trick they often pulled, but primarily on those with lower educational attainments. Had they upgraded?

Austin looked at her and smiled. “Lots of interesting additions to the conversation today. Yeah, yeah. It’s funny, actually. This Blue didn’t even pull a Turing Test on me or anything. They don’t even care to hide how much they don’t give a damn to talk to us anymore. Was the first person I talked to at the bank other than the secretary, which was, of course, also a Blue. He was smart. Talked me in circles and circles and would have never gotten tired of wasting my time today if I had let him. That’s what’s scary.”

Aiyana had only had a few scoops of the assorted items on her plate, but suddenly, she wasn’t hungry anymore. Any amount of interest became clouded by a churning stomach, spinning like the microbot still in her pocket. It was the knowing. The knowing that even when she had left, they had continued. That she hadn’t truly done anything at all in leaving.

“You don’t deserve that.” A sentence that did nothing.

“Not that it’s any better, but sometimes you can’t even really talk to them anymore,” Niamh added. “Going to the fabric store, and by store, I mean a kiosk in the middle of the sidewalk where you pick out fabric from the catalog, you stretch out the fabric on the holoscreen, and then the machine cuts it for you and spits it out. Just like that. No talk about what texture you want, just a catalog. And then you also have to pay a fee to help the kiosk remain a kiosk! It drives me up a wall.”

“On the bright side,” Milo said, “It is impressive. They’re doing God’s work with those Blues. Literally. Imagine how long it’d take trying to get a person to do all this stuff. Sucks in Austin’s case, though. For you, Niamh? No one’s buying your shit regardless.”

“Even if it’s true, that’s the problem,” Gueneverie added. “That’s why we can’t buy our home. Everyone would rather buy the clothes they print from that machine. Man-made goods matter, too.”

“It’s called a *fucking* three-dimensional printer,” he snapped. “It was invented over a century ago. And maybe she should choose a better career path.”

“Don’t talk to Gueneverie that way.” As always, Hasil was firm and to the point, but it only elicited an eye roll from Milo as he dropped his head back onto his hand and grumbled something unintelligible.

“Yeah!” Aiyana was only able to laugh at Niamh’s interjection, although she herself had likely not been defended, and maybe even forgotten by Hasil, who only ever leapt at a chance to defend Gueneverie.

Micaela, who would check out noticeably any time money that was not hers was discussed, looked up from the myriad of neon colors bursting from her phone screen to the ongoing conversation, snickering to herself at the ongoing situation. Mimicking Niamh, she began, “Yeah! I’m on Hasil’s side. In fact, Hasil, shoot him dead right now!”

Laughter swept across the table, garnering a great exhale from Hasil. With the eruption of noise a perfect escape, Rome stood up from the table with plate in tow to make his exit. Disgusted with the notion of eating by now, Aiyana wolfed down the rest, unwilling to waste even a bite, and followed behind him. Micaela remained, joking with the others.

“Hey, Rome,” she called from behind him when they had reached the kitchen entrance, where he scraped the little remnants of crumbs and juices from his plate. He turned to look at her and stepped to the side, allowing her to pass him and clear off his plate herself.

“Hey, Aiyana. How was y’all’s trip today?”

“Fun. But a once-a-lifetime kind of fun, if you get my drift. Refreshing, even.” As soon as she finished, she walked to her right and he followed when she passed.

“Once in a lifetime? Like you’re satisfied, or hate that it ever happened. Micaela ain’t say nothing about it, just that she was paid.” Without answering, she continued on to the children’s table, where Ayan

sat in silence, yet not disengaged; rather, always watching, never providing his own input. His observance was only broken by her extended hand and smile, a soft, 'c'mon baby', emanating in a mouthed whisper from her lips. As he pushed away from his chair she moved behind him, collecting his plate, and then faced Rome again to collect his as well; easily he relented. Stepping back into the kitchen, she ran the water on its lightest stream, wasting not a drop of water more than was needed to clear the plates of all their debris.

She placed the dishes in a cart beside the sink and looked at the two standing on the other side of her. "What are you doing tomorrow, Rome?"

"... I'm going to Hazel's. Gotta fix the boiler at her place."

As soon as Aiyana's eyebrow slightly lifted, Ayan chimed in, "Hazel as in Miss Cricket, Mommy."

She smiled at his nigh-terrifying perception before looking back up at Rome. "Ah, Cricket. I met her once. ... You think I could come? I won't be a bother or anything."

He eyed her for a brief moment before beginning to move out of the kitchen. "Why?"

"Because I'd love some fresh air."

"Thought you got plenty of that today."

She leaned back onto the counter behind her. "Do you really not want me to go? I thought you might be lonely. Hasil isn't going to come with you anymore, now that he can hunt. But don't worry about it." Lifting herself off the counter by the torso, she took Ayan by the hand and proceeded past Rome and out of the kitchen.

Behind her, laughter took him. "No, you should come with me. I'm just teasing you."

"Nobody has time for that." It was Rome now leaning on the counter, although quickly he moved to compensate for the wave of residents now entering the kitchen, slogging themselves by with the little energy they stretched through each and every day. Out he went with her.

"Since he doesn't have school tomorrow, bring Ayan too. Cricket has a little playground outside, he'll like it."

“Sounds nice. I’ll be up at seven a.m. sharp.”

Naturally, the next morning carried a lot of scorn from Aiyana to Rome when he actually knocked on her door first at seven a.m., then at seven ‘oh two, but harder that time. Ayan had had no problem heeding instructions, as his click-clacks on the keyboard entailed, but Aiyana jumped halfway to the ceiling when he pounded on the door harder that second time and fell back down into a crotchety existence that carried through breakfast. The morning marketing of the vendors, desperate to make a quick buck, only perpetuated this, and there was no Micaela up so early to introduce a bit of morning cheer. Could Micaela even elicit such emotion? After yesterday, perhaps Aiyana was better off without Micaela’s prying.

This all miffed Rome not, as he ate hungrily, yet neat and carefully with his knife and fork in tow. He seemed perfect at ignoring her if he needed to, even ignoring the ads at a time where either no one of the twenty-somethings was up or available as a ready distraction. He had them out the door by nine, and fitted the two carefully with their helmets. As she had before, she informed him that he was a hypocrite, as he never wore one himself, and he smiled. The sun had already started to burn and crisp her sienna skin as she and her baby hopped on the back of Rome’s motorcycle, fitted on the back with its own small, parts-filled trailer, and blasted off to Midtown.

By record time they had reached Midtown, evident by the sudden and inescapable pop-up, hologram billboards. It was never enough to have just one of anything, whether it was a luxury bag or a plastic bottle of liquid soap on your bathroom shelf, you needed several to be an acceptable member of society, they screamed at her. Well, not her, specifically, but those in Midtown; once you entered Northside, no one could afford much of anything. She swatted at them as they cruised slowly through the city streets, but when you did so, they floated up a bit and blocked a small pocket of the sky. They were old inventions, from her grandparent’s time. Swamp turned to the most parched dirt, parched dirt to broken up gravel road, and gravel road to the paved streets of Midtown. The streets were narrow and although you could go straight through the billboards, the visual clutter they added didn’t help. As crowded as they were with vehicles, people and Blues alike, Rome cruised through the area. Blues,

humanoid or not, knew to move out of the way, but many humans didn't. They nearly existed in a manner indistinguishable from the Blues, as the image the holochip projected directly over their corneas turned their irises a milky white and clouded their vision; in fact, the Blues walked about much straighter than they. Horrid was it how few colored eyes she saw.

When they reached Cricket's neighborhood, the concrete jungle of Midtown crumbled into kudzu-covered, cookie-cutter homes on cookie-cutter streets. Her head flipped from side to side as they passed through, each street looking more and more like the one before it. It felt like home, and it was even possible her old home was tucked away somewhere on one of these roads Rome sped past. Streets never had names here, and the only words on most signs other than abbreviations were "Onyx Front" in shiny silver lettering – the man never seemed to get tired of showboating.

Having kept her arms wrapped tightly around Rome's waist, she leaned slightly to the side and shouted, "How do you remember where she is? Every street looks the exact same." Perhaps she could then remember, too.

His long locs blew into her face, tickling at her nose. "There's no trick to it. I just be over here a lot, cause, y'know." He kicked the motorcycle with heel; she leaned her head back into the dip between his shoulder blades for a moment before they came to a stop. Immediately she peeped that the house was a little different, because it sat on the edge of a street and therefore was lucky enough to have a driveway that rounded to the left to reach the garage, rather than the straight pathways all the other homes had. Rome parked at this home, Onyx Front 641324, and hopped off before guiding the other two off the motorcycle.

At Onyx Front 641324, the garage was already wide open and the clanks of Cricket's metal tools being dropped on the concrete floor one after the other filled it. They approached the garage in a single file line: Rome, Ayan, and then Aiyana. Upon reaching the divide between cement and polished concrete, Rome shouted out, "Cricket."

She was standing not too far away, hidden behind the vehicle inside. He yelled again. "Hazel! It's me. I'm here."

With goggles shielding her eyes from view, she shooed away a hologram screen the vehicle projected to her and ran from behind the car. “Rome!”

She pulled her goggles off her face, but a faint outline of grime remained. Panning over to her guests, she added, “Plus two more. What brings you here?” She looked Aiyana dead in her eyes; one of hers was white, and the other a deep, dark brown.

Aiyana couldn't help but to stare straight back at them, her focus more on the irises set in monolids than the woman wielding them herself. “Just needed to get the kiddo out of the Den.” She caressed his hair; as he always did, he placed his hands on her own. Rome trekked off to the side of her, and stepped lower and lower after walking behind her car until he and his toolbox had disappeared without a trace.

Cricket followed him with her eyes and shook her head. “Bastard never says a word other than hello. Like he lives here.”

Her head snapped back to Aiyana in an odd, stiff sort of movement. Her fluffed up buns lobbed in the air as she cocked her head slightly to the side. “Anyways. Let's go to the backyard, then.” She turned as if she were only allowed to move in one direction. Aiyana stood still, staring at her as she sashayed over to the door at the back of her garage.

After a moment, Aiyana finally took Ayan's hand and stepped forward, and immediately Cricket added, “Watch the floor, there's bolts.” Aiyana did not.

Upon reaching the backyard, Cricket kicked at the vibrant green grass. “Turf. Isn't it the worst?”

The mother and son stood, staring at the white and gray playset; above the narrow fences were the tops of identical sets as far down the block as the eye could see. Although it was a rarity for them to see any sort of childhood play area that had not been rendered dangerous by now, Ayan did not fidget about, standing as still as his mother. She ruffled up his short locs, urging him forward by her fingertips. “Go play, baby.” He took two steps forward, paused, and ran towards the playground. When he reached it, he stood there and looked back at Aiyana. She waited until their staring contest entered its first minute before joining him. She did not sigh or groan about it, but found it a point of wonder how he had never played

alone. With toys, he was never selfish, even as a toddler. When she reached him, he took her hand and pointed at the swing. She got him up in the air before sitting on the swing beside him as he drifted back and forth with a gentle smile as her eyes followed him closely. Every couple of minutes, as the tips of his feet began scraping the turf, he asked, “Can you push me, Mommy?” A light push and he soared again.

Having slipped into her garage for approximately thirty minutes, Cricket came out in due time and collapsed on the turf, splayed out spread-eagle, and let out a great huff into the sky. At this point, Ayan’s swinging had slowed and he had ceased asking to be pushed, and he resorted to staring at her and anything else that breathed or made noise. “Do you want to get on the slide?” she suggested. He got up and went as if he had been ordered. Sigh.

Tired from the swing seat holding one half of her ass and not the other, she half-jogged over to where Cricket laid and threw herself back as well onto the scratchy turf. “Long day?”

Still staring into the clouds, Cricket responded, “Life is long, girl. I’ve spent like, a month with my face pressed up on a car battery. I’m sick of it.”

Aiyana turned on her side, propped up by her arm, to listen. She knew a lot, but cars were where her knowledge ceased. They weren’t something people on the northside of Onyx Front owned, but once you moved further south, everyone owned at least one. She extrapolated, “It’s a lot of fixing one car all the time. Why’s it always giving you trouble?”

Cricket tapped along the exposed skin on her lower abdomen. “Oh, you know. All our electronics are getting fried, all the time now. It used to be here and there, but now it’s about once every week. Three days ago was super ugly, right?”

She assumed the same position as Aiyana, looking in her eyes and waiting. If it was for affirmation, she wasn’t going to get it. Because... what?

After too long of a pause, Aiyana blurted out, “Huh?”

“... Three days ago. You didn’t see it at the Den?”

A stare. “I mean... we don’t have power during the day... so.”

Cricket threw her head back onto the grass and huffed another exasperated sigh. “So that’s what they’re doing to y’all. Midtown always has power, but we have power outages here and there. That wasn’t a problem at first. Like, I can deal with a couple of hours of no power every week, maybe as long as a day at a time in the winter if I’m feeling generous. But the last couple of weeks, they suck the power out of everything so badly that it’s burning through anything electronic like clockwork. I’ve had to buy three batteries already. Three days ago... it almost burned my damn house down. And a day with no power in this heat... well.”

Aiyana shot up like a bullet and looked down at her. “But why? Why do they need so much more power? And it’s hurting Midtown... Midtown is one of the few places where people work directly for the Enterprise. It doesn’t make sense.”

She gripped at her stomach as she chuckled. “People like me have to be gracious that we have a house to lay our heads in, in a relatively safe neighborhood. Jobs. Electricity at night. For now, that is.”

Aiyana’s heart began to leap in her chest as she inhaled air in deep nasal breaths, her eyes darting about the grass. Cricket’s last words echoed in her head. These conditions were expected out in the Northside, but in Midtown?

“Those batteries aren’t cheap. ... I’m running out of options. How am I going to get to work?”

As Cricket had said, the last human workers in this region, white collar employees of the final jobs Blues either could not be fully trusted in or needed extra supervision with, lived here. The pulses... they meant the people that lived here were replacing tens of thousands of dollars of equipment time after time, and the way Cricket diced it, out of their own pockets. They meant replacing rotting food and trying to keep breathing machines going.

“Yeah. They own my house, Aiyana. I’m running out of time.”

Who? Who was using up so much of the damn energy? The question ran laps in her head. It did not make sense. She prayed that it would not make sense, that it did not spell out the product of horrors.

“They’re killing me.”

Why was their hunger never satiated?

Her head flipped away from Cricket. “If this is what they are doing to Midtown, just for a little more energy, then...”

Behind her. “Realistically, distance was the only safety net. We really, really don’t have much time. *You* don’t have much time.”

The wind whistled.

“So you’d better flip a switch.”

Though she felt the tears glistening in her eyes and her hands too numb to wipe them, she spun to Cricket. “What?”

Without using her arms at all, Cricket somehow pulled herself upright into a sitting position, with her legs spread in a ninety degree angle. “Time’s ticking. Are you tired of the slide?”

Coming down the twisty slide for the last time, Ayan ran over to her and shook his head. “I’m not tired.” After this, he looked at Aiyana for the briefest of moments and fell into his mother’s lap, his head resting gently on her thighs. His eyes rapidly filled with tears.

Swiping at her own eyes, she asked, “Why are you crying?”

“You are crying.” His lashes fell to his cheeks and he snuggled closer to her.

“I’m not!”

Rome’s heavy steps grew louder and louder as he rose back up from the basement, standing at the entrance to the backyard with his toolbox in tow. “You’re good to go.” His tawny skin was covered in a thin layer of sweat. Cricket pulled herself up and off the ground, carrying herself up and over to him.

“You were able to fix it now?”

“There’s nothing I can’t fix,” he muttered through his shirt, which he had lifted to wipe the sweat off his forehead. Cricket turned around and looked at Aiyana briefly before running past Rome to her garage. Aiyana stood and Ayan stood with her, still clinging to her narrow waist. Metal clanged around the floors and walls as Aiyana joined Rome at his side, waiting. In a few moment’s time, Cricket reemerged with a moderately-sized black box; it seemed to weigh her down at the arms. A vehicle battery.

When she reached Rome, he received the compensation with the most delicate hold, as if it were an infant or young kitten. “It’s the last one that I have,” Cricket described, as he ran his fingers along the exterior. “Onyx Front only lets us have one per household. I’m really not supposed to have this, so... here you go.” Afterwards, she flung her hand outwards from her holochip, reaching into the screen that came forth and began running up a sum of money.

“Keep it,” he told her.

“But I don’t want to keep it. Here.” She flicked the money towards him; his back pocket buzzed. “It’s money you would better use. It’s the scraps they throw at us, just to buy little knick-knacks so we don’t off ourselves.”

Aiyana chimed in, “Your scrape check?”

“No, but essentially. It’s our pay. But they ‘let me’ live here, eat here, so I can’t use it to get myself anything that really matters.”

Rome subsequently dug into his pocket, retrieved his phone, and sent the money straight back to her. She flicked it towards Aiyana instead. “... Hold this for him.”

Her head flipped to him and he gave her a gentle nod. Would she have even put her holochip on if he had refused her having his money? *Flip a switch, flip a switch.* Unease rose in her chest. She wouldn’t have.

“Thanks. I’ll see you soon.” With that, he headed out of the garage and Aiyana followed after him, practically carrying Ayan on her leg. As soon as Rome sped away from Cricket’s home, Aiyana shuffled at his back and pulled out her phone. Hitting bumps in the road at high speeds, it nearly flew from her hands as she fumbled to grasp it tight once more.

“I actually have my phone,” she stated as her voice jumped around from the motion.

“For real? Weird of you.”

“So I’m going to send the money back to you.”

“*Nahhh,*” he stretched out. “It’s my treat.”

Her brows furrowed. “Don’t nobody need no ‘treats’ from you.”

Briefly, he threw his head back and let out a guffaw. “Are we about to do this again? Go on. We can send it back and forth all day long.”

“Okay, and why? One, she gave it to you. Two? You need it more than I do. Three, you must like for me to owe you something, but I don’t. I don’t intend to be in debt to anyone anymore.”

He was silent for a moment. “Okay, one. And I *chose* to give it to you.”

She scoffed when he continued in a mumble, “Two... that ain’t true. You know that’s not true. I’m not rolling around in cash or nothing, but... sure I’m closer to it than you are.”

And finally, “Three. It isn’t about ‘owing’ someone anything. I ain’t never asked you to pay me back for nothing, and I’m not trying to sneak up on you expecting some sort of payment in the future. Sometimes it’s about having each other. Like, I got you and you got me like that. That’s how it should be.”

Not a peep from her. What could she say? That was how it was supposed to be, but was it? Suddenly, her eyelids began pulling towards one another, so she rested her head into the crevice at his spine. The way the world should be, it wasn’t how it ever was. Ayan’s loose hair, which she had yet to retwist, tickled along the tip of her nose. Soon the day approached that he would come to know.

“That’s just how I see it,” he added.

When she reopened her eyes, Rome had already hopped off his bike inside of the grand gates of the den. With the help of his extended hand, she lifted herself up and off the bike, and then lifted Ayan onto the floor. He began leading his bike further and further in, eventually splintering off to the back of the den’s exterior. “It’s nap time. See ya.” She waved at him with a loose wrist, sleep still in her eyes; he had won his way, slinking off before she sent him what she got.

At where she stood, the den was louder than any noon had made it prior. Hand in hand with Ayan, rubbing at her lashes, the pair entered to men and women stumbling over their own feet as they flew across the grand corridor with their goods, trading the fruits of their craft for metal pans full of parchment paper-wrapped prisms leaking crimson juices. Unusually popular were the hunters, including Hasil and Jaid, who were swamped down with countless folkmen grasping at their cheap green and tan-

splotched clothes for an inkling of their attention. Aiyana blinked herself awake, one, two, three times, before a jolly grin flooded across her face from one bunched-up cheek to the next. The souls of these people, such that even those who had gone out to work for the day had seemingly been drawn back in early so as to beat the rush. Just by standing in place she stuck out like a red hot poker in a pile of iron from these people, who ran circles across the floor and nearly up the wall.

Her idle observation was broken by Micaela, who rushed her so fast that she could swear the woman was nowhere to be seen one second, then darting at her another, then nearly atop her the next, to where she had nearly leaped on Aiyana's petite build with her shapely own.

“Meat!”

Aiyana kicked her foot back, stabilizing as Micaela's weight bore down on her. Micaela landed on her own two feet, straightened up like a still spring, and grabbed her about her shoulders with both hands before shaking. “I have so much! I'm not about to just put it in any fridge. I'll put it in the women's fridge upstairs and kill anyone who doesn't know how to ask for some right.”

Her stomach did not rumble at this, but she grinned with her all the same. “Oh, I'm sure the fridges are full. God, I feel like it's my birthday!” She threw her hands up in the air, stretching out her joints and releasing all her existential sorrows. Where she felt worry, soon came sunshine, and fatigue, soon came rest. Why should she fret? Even without her moving a finger, the sun had still risen.

Within the corridor, songs of joy shifted to snaps and growls. “Are you gonna buy anything, Yana?”

She was broke, and she was still sitting on Rome's money, yes, but it really didn't count. So she was broke. “Nah,” she responded. “I'm not in the mood to fight nobody right now.”

Just ahead of her, a stand that stood saw its packaged meat flying from the table from grabbing hands before the vendor even had a chance to blink. Punches were now sailing, screams were being thrown from those who insisted it was their meat, but no, they had children, a wife, a husband to feed. That they hadn't had protein in weeks. Or even that they hadn't eaten in days. Milo soared forward,

decking a gardener with two kids in the face before pulling up the man's meat packages that had tumbled to the floor. Greedy bastard.

"Where's Rome?"

She kept her eyes on Milo. "Think he went straight to take a nap. ... You know? I might just go ahead and get meat after all." Rome hadn't eaten since breakfast. She was fine with her plates of beans and greens, but it wasn't fair for him.

Micaela chimed in after some time, "... You think?"

"Is it truly my birthday if I can't have some cake, too?" She finally broke her gaze. "I just need Ayan to wait out here for me, just for a few minutes. I can't reach my closet, you know." From under her, she squeezed his face gently with her elongated nails.

"Yeah, they would trample him. Look at them stepping on June! She *just* had a damn baby. God." Micaela drew into herself as she winced at the raging mass of people nearly crawling over one another to secure the best deals for themselves. "I'll go with you."

"Hmm. I thought he could wait with you until I got back."

Micaela's eyebrow jumped. "You trust *me*? Also, who's gonna help you shove people out of the way?"

It was a good point. At this, she scanned the room, stopping conveniently at the sighting of a wispy puff of jet black hair at her far right, away from the chaos of the meat sales. There. With one hand, she took Micaela, and the other Ayan, dragging both forward and directly around the crowd.

"Gueneverie!"

Now at her destination, the woman turned around, first with eyes widened like a bolting doe, which drew together with elation at the small boy hand-in-hand with his mother.

"Hello, Aiyana. Hello, Micaela." She dropped down to a squat in front of Ayan, revealing Hasil was standing behind her for some reason. "Hello, Ayan! I'm so excited that I get to see you on this splendid Saturday. How are you doing!"

"I am done with my math workbook," he announced.

“... Your homework?”

He shook his head, and then flinched and stepped back when Gueneverie released a deep gasp, taken aback, but stepped back to her only a second later when she offered her hand for a high-five.

With a more-tempered surprise now, she gasped, “Oh my! Why, you’ve only had that workbook for a week, Ayan! You are such a whiz kid!”

He fell into her arms in a tight embrace. As she patted him along his tiny back and the back of his head, she whispered to his mother, “Ah... it was actually the workbook for the next couple of months... I am constantly in awe of your son.”

Ayan pulled back, and Gueneverie immediately reached into her knitted and oversized tote bag, her cerulean raindrop earrings shaking vigorously against her blue-black skin as she finally pulled out another workbook. “Well, let me just say this is perfect timing, because I was just given these workbooks.”

Hand to the side of her mouth, she added, “These are special because they’re not decades old, mom. They’re new editions! Ha! Can you believe it?”

Aiyana received it from her as she handed it over, flipping through the pages in quick succession. “Oh, this ain’t nothing like what we grew up on. Any textbooks you could actually touch were old and tattered up. This is... this is nice.” She handed off the textbook to Ayan.

Micaela, who had already pulled her phone out during the short conversation, took a sliver of silence as a pure opportunity to immediately ask, “How did you manage to afford these, Guen Guen? The pages aren’t even paper, they’re texturized screens... that’s insane. It can’t be cheap.”

Because Micaela saw that she had the floor now, she added to round off her questioning, “... Hasil, why are you here? I thought you were selling meat, too.” He frowned.

Gueneverie stood back up to her full, spindly height, drawing her hands together at the fingertips with a wide smile on. “Yes, Micaela, these are great questions, because they can be answered with one answer. I could not hand this out to my students without his generous donation. Oh, Hasil, I’m so

grateful.” Still donning her bright smile, she turned to him, and his entire face broke into a smile just as bright as her own, his reddening cheeks adding to his vibrancy.

“*Ohhh*,” Micaela drew out for entirely too long. Immediately, Aiyana shot her a glance that could kill. Hush, girl.

“Well, *I’m* glad you’re here, Hasil.” Aiyana added as a final jab to Micaela. “Are you still selling? I’ve got money, for real.”

He shook his head. “I ran out. With the way things are going here, we don’t really get to keep anything that we make. Truth be told, we had already sold most of the meat before we even reached the Den.”

“To who?” Having come out louder than she knew it would, she swallowed down the rest of her nerves.

“Mainly Midtown folk. Gave that money to the bank. What we’re selling here is nothing. We drove and boated over so many trays of what we hunted.”

Already knowing, she asked, “Was it enough?”

“Not even for this month.”

A sick, dropping sort of stomach feeling to it. She pushed Ayan’s hair back with her hand once, twice. This den, this home would not last forever, these people, these friendships, and for her she was like a mouse whose hiding spots between walls were being filled in time and time again.

Micaela turned to her, letting out a groan at the news. “Don’t worry about it, Yana. You can have some of mine. Only you and the brat, though.”

She shook her head. “Oh, no need.”

Micaela’s lids fell into a glare. “So you’re good now?” To this, she moved Ayan a little closer to Gueneverie, looking her directly in the eyes. *Just one moment*. She patted at Micaela’s shoulder before swiveling around her. At the edge of the raging crowd was Austin, arms in his pants pocket and head held too high for his own good, and Milo, arms held tight to him and wedged with packages of meat between them and his abdomen. She weaved around flowing hands and scrambling bodies without even an

“excuse me”, as now was no time for niceties, and joined them by stepping directly in the middle with no invitation into their discussion.

Austin looked down at her. “... Hey, Aiyana. Where’s your son?”

“I’m good,” she answered, before flipping her head to look at Milo. Austin seemed to take her suggestion well, as now they were both silently looking to him.

“... What?” He readjusted the packages, hiking them back up to where they belonged. “Why are you over here? When did you get over here?”

She tilted her head. “Looks like your hands are full.”

“Nope, not really. Not really.” If he could place his hands on his hip, she was sure he would’ve. There was no need for engaging him in a sass competition, ‘cause she’d lose at the snap of her fingers.

“Of course, I’m not trying to insult a strong man like yourself,” she continued as his brows nearly fell to his lashes, “but it would be a lot to carry for anyone. I can’t help but notice.”

She glanced over at Austin briefly; a smile began peeking into the conversation. Milo held his brows firm, jaw locked, hip swung to a side.

“Trust me, hun, I don’t need *any* help. Especially not from *someone like you*. Don’t you dare ask me for any. I don’t give a damn about your kid either.”

What was that supposed to mean? She resisted an urge to breathe out deeply, keeping her breaths leveled. “Why would you need help? *I know* that you can carry all of it, I just think that you could be carrying something a lot lighter... something *valuable*. Something that’s not temporary.” She tapped at her chin with a rhythmic pattern.

Milo’s head came to cock just as far as her own. “Yeah?”

“But I did insult you. I’m sorry, Milo. It won’t happen again.”

His mouth fell slightly ajar. “I don’t care. What are you referring to?”

She stretched out her hands. Readjusting his jaw and scanning the corridor, he released his entire right arm’s goods into her arms.

“This is a lot,” she mused.

“Don’t worry. You’re not keeping all of it, even if you’re about to tell me the world’s best kept secret. Especially not if you don’t tell me. And I wouldn’t run; Austin’s liable to grab you if you do. Talk.”

Turning to Austin, his front was now to her back, his arms now crossed, and he towered over her. She faced forward again.

“A couple of days ago, we were at the table and Jaid turned on the feed. On there was Aron Front, and he was on there talking about the fly technology—”

Austin interjected, “The drone bees, yes.”

After turning back to look at him, she continued, “The drone *fairies*. And how they will revolutionize swarm robotics, data storage, self-reconfiguring robotics, so many things—”

Milo leaned towards her, accusing, “Yeah, as if *you* know what those words mean.”

She swallowed down anything else she was going to add, because he was right. She *didn’t* know. Folksmen’s Aiyana *shouldn’t* know what those things mean. She wouldn’t even watch such high-tech mumbo-jumbo. “I heard them during the news. They’re lots of big, fancy words for me, but I knew you’d understand them, and I just know that they’d really change things for anyone who had them.”

He sighed, and she watched as a bit of his tension flowed out from his shoulders. “Yeah. That would be the dream, Aiyana. That would be the dream. You don’t even know how cool that would be.”

Half because she wanted to refrigerate her earnings sooner rather than later, so she could cook them later that night, and half because she could have wrung his ignorant neck like a soap-soaked towel, she tied the last knot with, “It doesn’t have to be a dream is what I’m saying. They’re not just in development. They’re out there, and I’ve seen them with my own eyes.”

Austin drew into himself as his jaw fell to his chest. “What? No. You didn’t.”

“I did,” she insisted. “Just the other day, I literally saw one. I *have* one.”

Milo’s head flipped around in all directions. “Really? Where? Where?”

She sighed. “It’s in my little room. I promise. I just have my own stipulations... you can’t just tell anyone. You know where my room is; lead me through.”

After an exchange of glances full of great bewilderment, Milo began guiding Aiyana and Austin through the crowd using his personal method of crowd control, which was aggressively throwing his free hand up to knock away the face or body of anyone who stood in his way. He was protected from retaliation only by the rapid pace at which he walked, requiring Aiyana to scramble to ensure she did not lose sight of his orange turtleneck. At the closet she pulled out her key from between her breast and bra, unlocking her closet room. As soon as the door clicked open, Milo's hands were at the top of it, swinging it open.

Gently she pushed back at his chest. "What are you doing?"

"What? I've been here before."

"Respect a woman's privacy, my god. What am I going to do, lock the door and hide in here? You'd just wait for me until I have to pee or something." She scoffed at the implication of his concern as she swung the door to a complete close behind her. As soon as it shut, she dropped the packages onto the floor, pulled her holochip out and lit its flashlight, and then dove under her sheets to find a pinky-sized, two-winged microbot. It hovered up and down, up and down, each time going a little less high than the time before it. She closed her fist and oh-so-carefully swung the door back open.

The eyes of the men fell on her closed fist, and she beckoned them to step a little further in, she herself retreating into the room. When the tips of their shoes reached the start of her floor blanket, she loosened her fist.

It flew less than smooth, but the light that shone from it reflected in their eyes. "I found it in Midtown, just on its own. That means—"

"They're just about to release them." Milo stuck out his hand, and the microbot gravitated to him and floated there, prompted by his movement.

Austin turned to him. "This is phenomenal. If they're out now, they must have added the features that we thought they hadn't figured out yet, right before our noses. We've got to tap into that market before it's too late." In response, Milo nodded at him. She smiled. As if they knew.

Milo closed his fist, halting the microbot's movement. Looking at her with saucer-sized eyes, he asked, "Can I keep it?"

It wasn't something she had planned on, but she shrugged. "... Sure."

He took a step back and out through the doorway, nearly bumping into Austin where he stood. "... Enjoy." In fast succession they removed themselves from her presence, following one another with neighborly military stepping precision.

Chiaroscuro

Much later into the night, at nearly nine o'clock she sat over her freshly cooked plate of rice, beans, but mostly well-seasoned meat grilled nice and slow earlier in the day. She only took occasional bites and chewed slowly, savoring the bursts of oregano and rosemary within her lips and between her canines. It had not been for her in the first place, so she had delivered it to Rome as soon as Milo and Austin left her room, and after a lengthy, nigh bone-crushing hug from him, he had spent the evening grilling it under the early moonlight outside. While he had grilled the meat Aiyana had gone to the kitchen, reheating the rice and beans that had gotten cold on the stove during their absence from the standard dinner time. She occasionally poked her head outside to the back of the Den, where Micaela and Jaid sat at a wood table, playing checkers and full of giggles, while Rome camped around the grill with Hasil and Khaliq, an older carpenter, conversing in muted tones. While the two women kept one another busy playing checkers, Ayan ran around the gardens with Niamh, who showed him and several other children her apiary from a great distance.

It was a night of tepid heat and a calm breeze, so when the meat had been seared to a point of heightened flavor that kissed the spice mix that was added to it, and the sides had been warmed adequately and brought outdoors, she, Ayan, Rome, and whoever else had asked Rome to grill for them sat down across the tables to eat. Ayan had petered himself out just enough so that his eyes waned and his body swayed with his spoon clutched in his hand as he tried his darndest to ensure each morsel of food made its way into his mouth and not to his chin or shirt. Clearing his plate had never been an issue, as he

was taller than the nearly fifty parenting books she had read before his arrival predicted, so he finished before she had even gotten her plate together and then he laid his forehead on the table and allowed his body to sink onto it. When she reached his table and gently pulled him back by the shoulders, a wrinkle had been pressed into his forehead by the wood, so she set aside her own plate and lifted him up, bringing him in and laying him to sleep in her closet. Suddenly then his eyes blinked him back awake as his eyelashes fluttered, his tiny hand gripping her own as she tucked him in under the covers. A moment grew to minutes as she lay there with him, his eyes shut once more.

By the time she came back out from her closet, all had come back in and the entire den buzzed with the sound of shower water running. In the dim light at the edge of the quiet corridor, shielded from the glass ceiling by the floor hallways above her, Aiyana drew near to the flicker of a candlelight as she wrote in a pocket-sized, foldable journal. Parallel to her at the same tall table sat Enoch, who had not stirred in his careful writing in her presence.

Dear Sweet Diary, I spent much of last night trying to recreate the drone fairy, as in its functions, coding, and potential application. I have yet to discover why the real one is still moving, despite how long I've had it. Today, I gave away the prototype I spent all that time making just to get a little meat. I don't even like meat like that, and even if I did, what's the point of doing anything to get it? You buy it, you eat it, and it comes out eventually. It has no lasting value at all. It's a quick pleasure.

She bit down on her jaw as her pen hovered at just a millimeter above marking the paper.

Nothing lasts anymore. I don't know how long we can "have one another", either. It doesn't last. But it felt worth it.

She tapped the pen on the soft flesh of her skin for several moments, before her hand fell back on the page at a much lower position. With her free arm she guarded the page in its entirety from Enoch, making sure to leave just a part large enough to write.

Hazel "Cricket" — potential Spiral?

Onyx Front Worker

"Flip a switch"?

It felt silly hiding the page from Enoch, as she herself did not know a single member of The Spiral not already captured or killed. They were masters of disguise, owners of the abyss, and had hid in the shadows with little to no difficulty until a couple of years ago. She only knew that they existed because they had wanted her to know, to be one of them herself, and ninety-nine percent of the people who they had not wanted to know of them did not know of them. This, of course, was before the Enterprise had found them. At her heart she felt a great vexing, for she was still searching.

It was a journal of safekeeping, and she was risky to even be writing on it in the grand corridor. The Enterprise was in the minds, rooms, and walls of its people. She dared to think she would find the remains of The Spiral before she herself had. Despite the years-long journey of winding paths, if she could just find one. Where were you? Where are you all? Don't abandon these people! She needed to find Six. To find Montraie. Urgently. To right the wrongs of the world, as they had all been doing, as The Spiral had always aspired to do. To "Flip a switch", whatever that meant. She wrote the phrase once more.

As the power of life and death resides in the words and tongue, as soon as she dotted the two Is and left an exclamation at this point, suddenly the flame became ten times brighter as everything around her fell under the jurisdiction of a pitch black blanket of pure dark. A choir of speech fell to a symphony of silence, crickets stealing the show with their occasional chirps as no one moved not an inch, despite lacking the ability to view the person only a foot away from them, chatting it up. On the second floor, screams rattled the glass barriers and finally filled the grand corridor with some sort of tune, although not one she was fond of. Enoch's blue-gray eyes and stubbled chin were all she could see as he watched her in the little inkling of light they shared.

Within a few moments, glowing rectangles filled the sky, illuminating a moderate crowd of individuals, faces fraught with worry. The stairs, long defunct elevators, saw a smooth flowing river of luminescence as the den residents exited their hostel-like lodgings. As they were separated by profession, those that they trusted the most, she watched as down came the electricians first, rushing to assess damage, the crafters, who stayed up late making or selling things as best as they could, the gunsmiths, the

hunters. The eigengrau was broken down greatly by those hoisting their phones up in the air. They gathered in the middle, but Aiyana and Enoch stayed still.

The crowd began chattering as Aiyana wrote her last note, quickly, to cross out the word “potential”, because the timing of this all was just too good. She moved to seal the cover of her diary by pressing it closed with a pinch. Only her touch would open it, and its childish, unicorn-and-rainbow laden design added an extra layer of security for anyone who got a little too curious for their own good. And if they opened it, she never wrote on consistent pages, writing love poem nonsense on some and sappy shit about being a “young single mother” on others, as this was likely what everyone called her when she wasn’t around. She was no actor, maybe a swindler at times, but it was an easy enough role to play into. Her mouth would turn quite sour if she paid too much attention to Enoch’s attention to the item in her hands, so instead she looked to the side of them both.

Rome was now in front of her table, having strong-armed his way through the crowd. After exhaling deeply, he asked, “Where’s your son at?” ... See?

“I put him to bed during dinner, cause we ate late.” Like everyone else, she asked, “You know what happened?”

“Power’s out, with everything. The A/C don’t even work right now, and it’s already getting hot. Get in the middle of that crowd and it’s a million degrees.” The man spoke from experience, as he seemed to always battle the HVAC systems in the Folksmen’s Den and had walked away with far more draws and losses than anything livable.

A whistle cut through the crowd, drawing all eyes to the middle, and then, as if a force swept them, all those in the middle pulled back until they were as close to the wall as they could get, Aiyana and Enoch’s table quickly surrounded. Strong-arming her way through not by build or presence, but by pure brute force, Micaela eventually came and stood by Aiyana, her phone clutched between her teeth and glowing a neon white.

In the middle stood Evelyn, her hair pulled up into a tight, ragged bun behind her ears, still dressed in the clothes she had worn all day, her broom not too far from her. Immediately she clarified,

“Thank you for your silence and for your attention. I am not sure what’s goin’ on, but if we wanna get to the bottom of this, we’re gonna need some focus and calm in here. I sent Lloyd and Virgil to check out the electrical control panel, and they’re gonna come back with some answers.”

“There’s no need for that.”

All heads in the vicinity whipped towards the door in perfect time. The crowd which stood closest to the door opened the oval gathering into a parabola, clearing the way for who had clearly been the speaker. Standing at what was likely a perfect six feet tall, he stood at attention with heels clicked together, arms tight and hands at his side with all five finger tips pointing towards the floor in a perfect line. With a pulled smile, ash gray, brown-tinged polymer curls atop his head, and an immaculate navy blue suit, his left arm swung into motion, his body following suit as he stepped forward on his right foot and began walking. Immediately those in closest proximity to him drew back, spouses grabbing their partners and parents pulling their children back by the crease in their arms. As he continued in a straight line, grand strides unbroken by the unease that lay around him, three men from the sidelines that had brought their guns with them amidst all the commotion rushed to the middle, with Evelyn as the nucleus. Before the two closest to him could fully block his path, he cut straight through them, not a fiber of his wool suit brushing their own pitiful garbs. However, before he had completely cut through, he tapped briefly at their hoisted guns; most in the crowd had not seen it at all, but she made sure to watch so closely that she could nearly see each computational move that he made. It was clear they had not watched closely enough, for when the displays on both guns went entirely haywire, the men nearly dropped the tools and fumbled in regathering them. Whispers spawned from all areas of the room, but fell to a peep just as quick when he reached the man in front of Evelyn. A collective gasp — when he came to a halt, Evelyn moved around the man to face him.

Completely still, his hand began raising from his side again. Completely open, in a completely even motion. She could not help but to hold her breath, and there was no sound of inhale or exhale anywhere around her.

He held his hand out to her without saying a word. Extended, not too strict, not too at ease. She stared at him. One second. Two seconds. Three seconds. Four seconds. She shook it.

“My given name is Asher.” Under the untouched silence in the room, it was more than easy enough to hear him. “I’m a Blue Collar. We have heard so many things about you and your community. It is an honor to meet you, Evelyn Lee.”

Aiyana rolled her eyes to the moon, and when they came back down, she boomed with her head resting on one of her hands, “Aren’t you the convenience store cashier?” Heads flipped toward her, and she did not stir. Some stepped to one side or the other, creating a clear line of sight between him and her herself.

His cheeks drew to allow a smile. “This is correct. I wear many professional hats.”

From the other side of the room, Austin broke free of the crowd with his open hand held far in front of him. Asher pivoted as soon as he began to speak. “Hello. My name is Austin Wakefield; I do the accounting work for this mall space. We met the other day to discuss the property taxes. What brings you here at this time?” He stuck out his hand and Asher shook it.

“Yes, Mr. Wakefield. How could we forget. After hearing your proposition, we are paying this mall space a visit. We have a lucrative offer that we are excited to offer you.”

Uncharacteristically, Austin’s face seemed to brighten at this. “Are we going through with my ideas? I know that we’ve been coming short, so I think they’d be a great way to maintain our residency here while also making sure that the Enterprise isn’t getting cheated—”

“Actually,” Asher interrupted in a loud baritone, “After careful consideration, we have decided to refine and... pivot your plans. We ran the numbers a couple thousand times, and are certain we have produced a greater, more efficient plan.

Austin, too, fell completely silent. Shut his mouth that held words in the open, and listened. “Onyx Front, dedicated to its citizens, has recognized its estranged relationship with you, our working class people. How we had excluded you, and the visible divide, both geographically and economically,

between our sections of the city. We have watched you, the ‘Folksmen’s Den’, attempt to come back into the rules and regulations of our city. How hard we have made it for you. Our foolish mistake.”

She expected “mhm” and “that’s right” to come from the crowd. There was nothing at all.

Waiting.

“You are strong, capable beings.” He began to drift slowly in a circle, stepping to his left and turning his right foot out to keep balance on a fixed axis. “Where others yield to complacency, degeneracy, and the utmost horrific violence and criminal activity, you continue to pull yourself up by your bootstraps, dedicated to hard work in the name of self-sufficiency.”

After finishing his last sentence, he stood there and looked directly at Evelyn. Time carried on, until nearly half a minute had passed. When the silence had already drawn on for much too long, he lifted his hands, and then began to clap at a steady rhythm.

“For your hard work, give yourselves a round of applause.”

The echo of his claps, metal encased in silicone slapping against one another, were deafening in the nothing of the corridor. After a while, someone in the crowd began to clap too, and then it seemed the circle of bodies around him joined, maybe to keep him less lonely or to feel a little less awkward about the whole thing, too. Certainly there was not a smile in the venue. Soon, the entire damn room filled with the popping noises of eruptious clapping, like toy monkeys on batteries banging sewn-on cymbals together. When he reached what was probably the programmed amount of acceptable claps for the situation and stopped, the room gradually fell into his footsteps once more. When the last clap’s heat had faded from the air, then he spoke.

“The revolutionary technological advancements of the Enterprise – of course, built off the back of your material, agricultural, and industrial expertise – have created an ideal world in which the working class can be relieved of such duties. For hard working citizens like yourselves, there are chances to move up into higher-paying jobs that only active, productive members of society are provided.” When would he finish talking?

“In conclusion, we would like to present to you all, as a testament to your hard work and a desire to build a more direct relationship, the opportunity to join the suburbs of Onyx Front. There, you can engage in less strenuous work, contribute to the greatness of our city and country alike, and live in a stable, safe society, much safer than residing on this land. No armed guards will be necessary. There will be much greater chances to move up in society, given that you are the most persevering members of our society. You are representations of personal liberty. Independence. Self-reliance. Join Onyx Front in championing these things. It would be our greatest honor.”

Already, Evelyn had developed sweat beads on her forehead.

“Here, all we can see are hundreds of the direct successors of Aron Front.”

Evelyn held her wrists with a grip as if she were wringing the sweat from her body. “... What? What do you mean by that... what do you mean?”

Now that her back had begun to fall out of its board-straight stance, he seemed even taller when he drew his body together tighter than a military man standing at attention.

As quick as a bullet. “You will leave this land behind. There are homes and employment waiting just for you in Midtown.”

She took a step back, two. Balling her fists, plain as day, she began to tremble. “Absolutely not. We don’t need handouts. We’ll work this land and in this town until we scrape together what’s needed here if we’ve got to.”

He bowed. “Mrs. Lee, that will not be necessary. They are jobs and homes you have earned; we have simply found more sustainable and optimal means of living for you all given your income. We implore you to join us in the Enterprise, in Onyx Front, because...”

He lifted his head back up, still half-bent over. White irises looking in her own. “In a week’s time, there will be nothing left for you here. What will be done here is already finished.”

After this, he chose a quaint smile and elongated back open into a full stance. He pivoted and then snapped back to the front, and then began marching out. “Your homes are already prepared for you. Depart as soon as possible. This space will not be restored in a manner suitable for living at any point.

Without warning, Austin shot out from where he was glued to the floor and ran to Asher, grasping at his arm with a grip that squeaked against his silicone. His chest dug in and fell out with heavy breaths. “You can’t be serious... there’s nothing else you could offer us? We’ve been adamant that we’d like to stay here. If there’s anything we can do, please let us know. Please, *let us know.*”

Asher’s eyes were fixated on the door. Not even a glance back. Austin’s arms fell to his sides shortly, where they hung limply. Shaken off like a moth landing on a sleeve. His march continued.

As he continued his exit, the room once quiet regained its chatter. However, the confusion was different; it was deep, sincere, with no air of problem-solving or determination. Whispers of conversation floated past her ear, each unique yet defeated all the same. What about my farm, one asked. The farm out back that they had worked on since fifteen years ago. She was nine then, and another world from here. In those fifteen years she had traveled across the country, went to college two years early and departed two years early, lost loved ones and bore a child, and in all that time they had tilled the same unforgiving dirt on which this mall sat, day after day, season after season warring against the destroyed climate of the world in which the summers scorched, the winters froze and rotted, and between them all flooded away. Sowing seeds which would never grow the way they ought to, for the world refused them.

When the sound filled her ears to a point of buoyancy, she floated off from her chair, drawn to the gathering of bodies all about her. The resistance she felt while first moving forward gave way; Micaela had stepped back, asking a question she saw and did not hear at all. Moving to her east, she clashed with elbows and strong arms. The only home I’ve ever known, some cried. It’s not safe out there, said some to her right and left and behind her. A hand briefly ran down the small of her back; she flipped to look at them, but her eyes did not see what her ears had heard. Those schools, she said. Awful for your boy, he’ll learn nothing – to uproot him. This is my home, they cried. My kids were born here. I was married here. I buried my mother here on this soil. *This is our home.* Stepping forward, the air suddenly gained coolness, darkness, and she saw nothing more than the outlines of the circle around her and the man, if she should call him such, who departed.

“Tell them the truth.” She hadn’t screamed it, but deep in her chest it gripped at her lungs. Loud enough that there was a collective pause he joined in with. His steps forward and out ceased.

He turned slowly. Of course, a smile was plastered on his face, but it was not as full as it had been before. “Hm? I didn’t quite catch that.”

She fell forward on her first step, and made her second step deliberate. “Tell them the truth. Tell them what’s going to happen to them. Tell them what they’re losing.”

He faced her, his hands held together in front of his torso. “Oh, Aiyana. I’m sure you don’t know *what* you are talking about. There will be conversations to discuss the specifics.”

Her steps continued and those who blocked her way scattered. “No. Tell them that it’s not some ‘royal treatment’ for their hard work. That there’s no rest or honor in doing what you say. Tell us! Tell us that you’re trying to wipe us all off the grid.”

His smile did not malform at all, yet carried the cadence of a coy grin. “‘Wipe you off the grid?’ We assure you that this suggestion is illogical. Austin Wakefield has now been supplied with legal documents showing the residences that have been reserved for all the settlers currently here.”

She stood right in front of him. One step closer and her feet would be atop his own. Far behind her, Austin called out, “... Yes, I see them in my local files, now. Looks to be all on the same couple of blocks.”

The moonlight and stars in the ajar door shone all around him. He brought his hand to her shaking arm, her nails that dug so deeply into the muscle of her palms that they began to tear. The tears which sat within her lower lids. Did he know of how the muscles of her heart pulled in together so tightly in pushing blood out from itself that it ached her? She feared as much when he took her right hand.

“You are upset.” No more smiling. His white irises pierced closer than they ever had.

With a jump in her throat and a released gasp, she pulled her hand away and held it with her left. “You bastard. You can try to trick everyone, but you can’t fool me. You never will. I *know* the game. Because I *wrote* it! I played it.”

How her voice trembled. “You *abomination*. You don’t get to wipe them out! You don’t get to do that.”

As she breathed the last few words, a black hand fell at her torso and pulled her back, then another one at her shoulder. A familiar wiry goatee tickled at the parts on her scalp, pressing her body to his own. At her side, enough moonlight fell on him to see that Enoch was sweatier than ever before, and after gasping too much, he faded back into the crowd. Rome gripped her to him tightly, and without words, his fear was felt. Enoch’s, however, would take more explaining than his.

His fear was felt, but she had to, she must, so she placed her hands on each of his elbows and pushed away from him with all her might, kicking at his shins with her heels. “You don’t get to wipe them out!” He pulled her back to earth with a firm hold. She fell until her heels were glued back down to the concrete into a younger version of her own body, one that she had pushed down for half a decade. A rage of empathy and passion that she never wanted to feel. No, not rage, even if it seemed as such; that was just people misinterpreting her. She hurt, deep and raw she hurt. When would she escape her own powerlessness?

Smile returned. “The resiliency of you people. In your true and honest work and devotion, you will bear it. You will be happy.” He walked forward and allowed the moonlight to swallow him until he had wholly disappeared.

It took Aiyana nearly a minute before she felt safe to open her eyes. Surely all would be staring at her, but instead the Folksmen were shuffling about now, the conversation erupting immediately in Asher’s absence. There was no longer a grand oval around her, as people had closed the distance to engage in wider conversation with their neighbors. Conversation no longer surrounded confusion, even in lieu of her own actions that now flushed her face warm in retrospect. Instead, voices of discontent began rising, enraptured with passion much like her own, cries of rejection and stubbornness, and as a counteraction voices of complacency rose alongside them. She pushed away from Rome and stood on her own two feet, wobbly still. Her feet leaned this-a-way, that-a-way, but hesitated and went nowhere fast. No group could hold her; even if they did not know it, this had been of her doing.

Gathered near the center was Evelyn, Austin, Milo, and a few other financial planners for the Den hovering around Austin's hologram. They circled around it frequently, scrolling through and through pages and pages of what was likely legal documentation. Yes, she was no financial planner, no one had to remind her of that, but she moved on light steps until she landed right next to Lloyd, who she recognized as one of Rome's mentors. If she looked at it one way, it wasn't really a closed circle, but more of a horseshoe that needed some more bodies to complete it, an open invitation she would take.

Across from her and behind her side of the hologram, Milo clapped his hands together loudly, and her eyes bounced up to meet him. "... First, I will say that there's gotta be something illegal about this. Even if we're squatters, they have to give us at least a month, usually."

"They've condemned this building," Austin stated after a while. "If you can prove that it's unfit for human living, you can ask people to move out almost immediately."

Lloyd called out, "Unfit for human livin'?" He was an electrician by trade, but a carpenter and a general handyman that had fixed more than a handful of leaks in Aiyana's closet over the last few months. "I'll be damned! Me and my boys don't run 'round this place playin' fixer upper like we do to be told this place ain't fit for human livin'."

Evelyn exhaled. "I doubt they'd have to prove it. It's unfit for human livin' if they say it is. And the way the dirt's uneven, wet then dry in this part of town, they could probably just say the foundation's unstable and run with it."

Unfit for human living. The use of "human" was so... perfect, deliberate, even. Specific. She tapped at her lip.

"Certainly there's more than enough handymen here to keep this mall up-to-date," Aiyana affirmed. "It can't be about that, to tell you the truth. They really, really want this land. So, why do they want this land so bad, and why do they want to relocate us? That's what we ought to ask ourselves."

Their heads flipped to look at her, and if they didn't seem so genuinely contemplative more than anything else, she would have maybe fallen a bit flustered. But they said nothing and thought instead, and she let them.

After a moment, one of the financial planners she hadn't met before spoke, "... You had an outburst, and now you're feeling up to the task of butting into our conversation?"

She looked over at him and stared. 'Our conversation', he says? As if it weren't her business. Yes, she had had her outburst, and perhaps there was shame in that; yet, this needed to be said.

Aiyana lowered her head and nodded. "My apologies. My outburst is... because I care. As I said before, we should be asking ourselves this." The man's face twisted into a scowl.

Still, Austin responded, "I'm wondering the same thing, Aiyana. For what, right? You could chalk it up to pure principle, like, 'I don't want these squatters on my land anymore'. But there's not even a mention of the company that owns it wanting to evict us... we were just paying on it, and now it's condemned and we have to leave. Maybe they're being protected. Maybe the goods we bought and sold here, ultimately, were tax evasion."

"Tax evasion? Oh, please. Do you think Aron Front pays taxes? The people here were being eaten out of house and home, giving the owner all the money they had while living on a land that the owners weren't making any profit from either way. It's not about what we didn't do." Aiyana walked and stood right beside him. "It isn't the fault of anyone here. I'm not sure it has anything to do with anyone here anyways. I think we're just collateral. They were desperate for this land and we were just a minor inconvenience for them."

Evelyn nodded. "I was thinkin' that, yeah. But like you said, Aiyana, we ask why now. This land ain't worth shit past the mall. It's not in a convenient spot to turn it back into a mall. Poor farmin' land too, although we made it work; always too soggy, too dry, too cold and no nutrients or life to the dirt. The little we did fix took too long to revitalize. The Industry Blues are better off working greener pastures."

"Yeah," she mused. "So it doesn't make sense. 'Unfit for human living'. They're going to use this property for something that has nothing to do with human use, nothing at all."

"Okay, but that could be anything." Milo stepped forward, his hands already thrown to either side of him like he was ready to deliver a sermon. "That land could be used for mining, manufacturing, anything. Could be a storage area—"

“Bingo.” She stuck her finger up and walked around the hologram with a sideways sway of her hips until she reached him on the opposite side. “Whatever it is, it will be run by the Blues and for the Blues, and only they will be on this land. We’re being driven out for their benefit.”

Milo leaned in to her, whispering, “You think they’ll be making the drone bees here?”

Taking a step away from him and facing the rest of the group, she continued, “That’s why I said that this eviction or relocation, whatever you want to call it, isn’t about us.”

The same financial planner that had spoken earlier crossed his arms. “If we’re not going to be on this land, it doesn’t really matter what they’re doing here. What’s your point?”

At this point, most of the corridor was silent, and most of the eyes lay on the decision makers at the center of the room. On the other side of the hologram and twenty feet from her, Micaela, Hasil, and Rome stood at attention, as did those beside them in the grand circle they formed. “My point is that it’s not about ‘honoring’ anyone here. He’s trying to act like our lives from here will be better than where we are right now. Why would that be the case? What would they gain from doing that? What would they lose if they don’t give us somewhere nice to live? Nothing.”

All around, people looked to their left and their right in the dim light that there was. Austin’s brows furrowed as he looked deep into the halls of the second floor, Evelyn at the floor while holding her chin, and the financial planner kept his arms crossed. Who cares if she believed it or not, if she was impressed? Micaela, Hasil, and Rome, nodded at her. Milo scoffed.

“Everything has its downsides, Aiyana, but the plan looks solid from here. Obviously this isn’t an ideal situation, obviously this sucks, but dammit, we’re not getting murdered. It will be fine.”

“I’m just saying that we *should* be hesitant to go—”

“It will be *fine*,” Milo stated with a raised voice. “I’m tired of your pessimism. We all are.”

Her stomach tensed up. We? Who’s we? Had they all been talking about her? These people had said she was their family just before. She turned around, facing Micaela, Hasil, and Rome, mouth agape.

As if beckoned, Micaela stepped out from the crowd. “Milo, she’s right. We should at least be cautious and suspicious. Don’t see a few damn blueprints and get all excited. Even if they’re not going to kill us by firing squad as soon as we get there, this is a big change and we’re right to be worried.”

“Firing squad?! Listen to all this fear mongering you’re actively doing! Oh yeah, let’s let the uneducated, black single mother preach to us! If you have such a well-rounded perspective of this situation, you shouldn’t be so pessimistic in the face of everyone that cares about what you have to say. What would the Enterprise gain from actively putting us in harm’s way or ruining our lives? Do you think they want that bad PR, and that everyone’s as stupid as you? Be grateful for once in your miserable life.”

With the last sentence as her fuel, Micaela stormed through the hologram and wrung Milo by the collar of his orange knit turtleneck, likely easy for her due to their equivalent height. Aiyana jumped back as soon as she crossed over.

His expression did not falter. “Fight me if you want to fight me. I’m not afraid to put my hands on you if I have to. You and her are wrong.”

“No, you’re ignorant.”

Evelyn walked and placed her hand on Micaela’s shoulder. “Micaela, he’s right. Now let him go.”

Micaela turned to her, uttering in a soft voice, “But, Evelyn…”

“Let him *go*.”

In less than a second, she released his collar. He patted off the remnants of her touch.

“It ain’t ideal. In fact, it’s awful that this is happenin’. But being an adult means acceptin’ what we can’t change. If we go into it with the wrong heart, we’re gonna have the wrong experience. Yes, like you said, Aiyana, we may be collateral. But if we have homes to go to we have a future. And that’s somethin’. And Milo’s right. The Enterprise ain’t going to hurt us. Yes, throughout my fifty years I’ve seen them do so many things that were hurtful. But that’s ‘cause things change, not ‘cause they try to hurt us.”

Amongst the crowd, several murmurs of approval and light applause radiated. Evelyn's eyes sat with lids half-hung, hiding her blue-green irises in a demeanor much too calm. It reeked of defeat, and her blood rose to a rolling boil. Wasn't she a leader? This home she had toiled to build, she would relinquish at the drop of a hat in less than an hour at the command of a man whose heart did not even beat? Her throat ran dry. Did Evelyn not feel the same rage that she did? She hurt, she hurt, and there Evelyn stood, back bent. She could not believe it. Had she not built this home to protect herself? No, *they* hurt. The people themselves, even if they concealed this. She turned to Micaela, whose head jerked abruptly to the other side and flopped to face the ground. She had claimed they were best friends and now she couldn't even look at her.

"Bullshit," she spat. There was no stopping it. "They sit there and they don't do anything at all when we suffer. I haven't even been here for more than a couple of months and I've seen so many people die here. Half of us can't read and we're all malnourished, yet you have some people on the other side of town having banquets and balls, living like kings. Trying or not, they're hurting us and they just *don't care*."

"Aiyana."

Now Micaela was looking at her. Eye to eye, her face held a well of pain that Aiyana had traversed once and never again in late night conversation. Seeing the scars upon Evelyn's back so exposed in her white undershirt, it was impossible for Micaela to challenge her.

"Maybe this is their way of rectifying that, Aiyana. We've got to hope as much." Evelyn's voice was softer than ever. She cared, but it didn't change what she knew, and she brought her clasped hands on her chest, pressing down on her heart lightly. Please, be still.

Austin interjected, "It's a move, but if we work just as hard out here as we did back here, those of us who are dedicated to working hard will see their hard work grow into stability for themselves and their family. It's up to us how bad that experience is. The Enterprise is giving us a lot of space to grow."

How could he say that? Did he not know Cricket? She had met her twice at complete opposite times of the year, and all the woman did was work. She wasn't rolling in any sort of stability.

Milo added, “Exactly. It’s in their best interest to support and protect us as we get things figured out.” Of course, this idiot has to speak. “The Enterprise is built to work in the favor of people like us, not harm us.”

“I don’t agree with that,” a voice spoke. It was Lloyd. “It’d be a hell of a lot nicer this is happening if that was true. It ain’t true. They don’t give a damn what we do. What do you think they got the Blues for? Four generations of carpenter men in my family and I’m the first one that can’t get a damn job no how.”

“Your personal problems have no place here,” the financial advisor stated.

“It ain’t my personal problem. We are *all* facin’ the same problem. That’s why we built this place from the beginning. Don’t you remember, Evelyn? Don’t you remember? And we’re just gon’ throw it away without a fight after we worked so hard? No. I don’t like it not one bit.”

“Ugh!” The financial advisor growled, breaking his calm and composed power stance to bare his claws at Lloyd. “You people are always complaining about how hard you work and how much you don’t get, yet it’s only you all apparently getting paid in dust while most others are reaping what they sow. News flash: you’re reaping what you sowed too! The world doesn’t stop for anybody. You either adapt to it, or it’ll leave you behind! I literally lost my wife just the other week. I’m tired of hearing about how *you people* in particular have it so hard.”

By the time she had finished talking, Rome had already advanced close enough into the situation that Aiyana left her spot and walked to stand as a barrier in front of him as he had done for her. He was followed on either side by other mechanics and carpenters. “... Who the hell is ‘you people’?”

Milo let out a chuckle. “Not you too, Rome... first it’s Aiyana whining, then Micaela, and then Lloyd. Does she have to spell it out for you? If there’s a pattern it’s ‘you people’s fault, not hers.”

Although he pushed her through the hologram now, causing almost everyone in the middle to shift a few steps backwards, she held him tight at either wrist, keeping her face round and taut. This fool wasn’t worth it.

“Enough of the bickerin’, you all! Since you kids are so damn smart, what else are we going to do? Huh?” Evelyn stood at the epicenter, arms crossed.

She drew her mouth open to speak, but before she could, an impassioned voice rang out from the distance. Didn’t she recognize it? It sounded like one of Hasil’s acquaintances, but with her head pushing back Rome at the chest the way it was, she could not tell.

“Stand our ground, as we always have and we always should! I was a boy when I saw the great men and women here come together to form this sanctuary from the inner city crime. And through protecting ourselves from the ails of the town beyond us these past twenty years, we formed a community that deserves more than us simply throwing in the towel because some Blue bastard told us to leave! I don’t go out and hunt and sell for us to give in so easily! Evelyn, what the hell?”

The crowd filled with both roars of discontent and cheers of allegiance. Rome finally faltered in his push, freeing up her eyes to see once more. Around her were tears in the eyes of many, balled up fists that shook in the face of a neighbor, hands held to hearts in memory and protection of a two-decade legacy.

“Hey!” Austin yelled, with a voice that ripped through the crowd and ended on its last limb as a sound shrill and hollowed out. When it was silent again, he continued, “No one here gets to criticize Evelyn for her decisions. I won’t allow it. How dare anyone here forget the sacrifices she made to build this place for us! In our faults and shortcomings, she never relinquished her support for anyone in this room. This is harder for her than it is for everyone else here.”

Rome finally stopped pushing, freeing up her vision to look at the man. With chestnut skin, he held his hands in fists as he waved them in the air, sticking true to his conviction. Khaliq was his name; he was Rome’s friend or at least she had seen them around one another a couple of times here and there.

“I’ve no intention to insult Evelyn! You’ve seen us work beside her for years. She’s the leader of us all and I believe in her. I’m loyal to her, with all my heart, but it’s this space that brought us all together! For nothing in the world are we going to throw it into the hands of these people just because

they say so, without so much as a fight! I refuse. I ain't going nowhere, no matter what y'all choose to do." His arms were crossed now, his legs apart and planted firmly on the floor.

Many people nodded now, some even moving closer by his side. Cries of, "this is our home!" stirred her heart, and filled her eyes with a light film of moisture which hung in her lids. The passion of these people was evident; even with the message and the threats therein, they would not go so quickly. They had united against a suffering, imminent and deeply-scarring, one she wished deeply to expel from her own conscience. Of course it was hard for Evelyn, and her eyes were continuously drawn back to her pained expression. Yet greater were the cries of home from the people. When a vanguard of the Folksmen had either stood by Khaliq in voice or physically, Evelyn answered her people.

"... This is a democratic decision, it looks, and I'd never want to disregard the wishes of you all. If we're gonna give 'em some push back, we're gonna do it together." She looked into the sky and pushed the last of her blonde hair wisps from the dip of her eyes, letting out an uninhibited sign. "Lord knows that I, with everything in me, don't want to leave. This ain't a land or a mall or what have you. This is our home."

Great whooping and hollering amongst the folksmen carried on like a drawn out standing ovation. When it finished, unchallenged laughter could be heard breaking through the silenced bout of laughter a certain man seemingly could not repress for even a moment.

"Here goes nothing, you crazy bastards," Milo spoke. "And to think that *she* drove you all to do such a thing." With that, he walked away and into the darkness beyond the crowd, shoving people out of the way despite his petite frame as soon as he broke through the crowd.

"God willing," Austin added, looking at Evelyn. "If it's your decision to follow theirs, then I know what I need to do in the upcoming days. First thing tomorrow I'll be in town."

She nodded at him. "Yes, Austin, thank you." Louder to the audience, she shouted, "Although the power's out, it's about time we all hit the hay. Figure out strategy in the morning."

The crowd dispersed, the glowing rectangles dispersing into a million separate directions as everyone headed to their places of rest, still deep in conversation as babble still filled the air.

She navigated her way to her room, mostly in the dark. She tapped to feel her phone and key in her pocket, separate from where her journal was, and left it where it was. Had she said too much? Had she shown them too much passion? There was a tugging feeling that was irresistible, and needless to say, she had acted. It was too much to hide. She held herself tightly in the dark as she made her way to her room.

Was that a person? Faint in the dark, her eyes had adjusted just enough so that she registered the outline of what seemed to be a man. Her baby! She fell back, just to immediately be snatched by the tight grasp of a large, yet slender hand on her wrist.

Scream? No. She threw back and tugged her forearm far away from the figure in front of her, but to no avail. Her arms slammed against the drywall as the figure pinned her. If she hadn't removed her bracelets earlier in the night, it might have made just enough noise for someone to hear her.

Downy hair tickled at the nape of her neck and on the cartilage of her ear as into them was whispered, "What's up with you?"

Really? She tried jerking her hands down towards the floor rather than nailed to either side of her head, but his grip was unrelenting. "Nothing's up with me... leave me alone." Her voice warbled before she had time to catch it.

"I've never seen you act like this before, the way you just acted in front of everyone. You barely speak at all."

She bucked forward, causing him to jerk backwards and out of her ear. "Maybe it was time to speak." From here, she began making out the waves of his hair, his pointed nose. The voice itself was more than telling enough.

"Oh, don't get deep on me. That doesn't mean anything. You did that for a reason. What's your dog in this fight?"

When she yanked this way and he secured her position, in enough time it wiped all the energy she had left for the day. Fourteen hours she had been up, and now her chest was rising and falling rapidly. In front of the crowd of these people, she had given energy that she hadn't possessed in the first place – yes,

this was true. It was this “dog” that had kept her going, distantly unfamiliar as it had abandoned her long ago.

“I just wanted to point out things I noticed. That’s all.”

She flipped her head to the side, and he pressed his nose against the side of her scalp. “Yeah? How do you know that Blue?”

In, out. Chest rose and fell. “I just saw him on the Southside once or twice. Nothing deeper than that.”

“On a first name basis with him. And when the hell do you go to Southside?”

She turned to face him in the darkness. “Are you jealous?”

A chuckle. “I can’t be bothered. But what I do know is that you know more than you’re letting on.” A seering shock shot through her veins and muscles, rendering her static in his arms. There was no way he could see this, certainly, but her eyebrows were digging into her lids, her chin pushed up against her neck. Had he seen her journal? Read her holochip at night? Found things she hadn’t even discovered yet? She opened her mouth to talk once, twice, and said nothing.

“You said you found the drone bees in Midtown, but you found them on the Southside. From him, I’m sure.”

The temptation to sigh aloud and deeply seized her. She continued to stand there and listened, frozen. “Which means you’re really connected. You’re tapped into that business and you’re keeping it all to yourself. Why you wanted to trade me a drone bee for some fucking meat, I’m not sure.”

“... I’ll admit that you’re smarter than I thought you were. Connecting to the Enterprise... investing and getting a small taste of what’s next to come. Getting the upper hand over all the fools in here. Playing the game.”

Her turn to chuckle. She flexed and popped her curved back off the flat wall. “I don’t know what you mean. How could I invest in anything? I’m a broke, black single mother.”

With one finger, he outlined her chin. “There are ways... to earn money. Not the most respectable... but, it seems you made it work all the same. And now you’re one step ahead of all these fools fighting to still stay in the past, living in this hellhole.”

He released one of her wrists as he bent to the ground, cackling. His head fell beneath her waist, and she watched as it slowly crept back up to her face.

“Holy shit. You played those fools into begging for a change they’re not going to get. I know I’m not the nicest guy myself, but you’re a witch.”

Her breathing ceased.

“I figure it’s easy when you don’t really care about any of these people, anyways.”

Like a cat clawing at her chest. Another sharp pain shot through as soon as he finished his sentence. If he wanted to be delusional, let him. But those things she had said, she said it... because she had to. Not for her, not to impress anyone there, but because someone needed to say it. Why should she deny her heart? The closer she got, the more it would bleed and flood her heart. She exhaled deeply, inhaled.

Fervently she shook her head. “You’re wrong. That wasn’t why I said it.”

He was eye to eye with her now.

“I said it... because it was true. Because they should try to stay here! It’s their right. They’ve earned it.”

It was his turn to shake his head. “Aiyana, Aiyana. We all know that it should work that way, but it doesn’t. Just because you work hard on something, doesn’t mean you ‘earned’ it. They didn’t protect their bases right and they’ve been had.”

Yes, she knew that. Two years of long work in university, the type where she rose at seven in the morning, working in a lab and attending classes just to go right back in that lab and produce knowledge that would be stolen from her altogether – yes, she had been “had”. Years of working to remember, to rebuild something that was lost to perhaps make the world a little brighter, only to leave her destroyed, left in the dust, and desolate. Yes, she’d been “had”. Yes, she knew. And it wore her dry and tired, the

spry energy which allowed her to wow even the likes of Aron Front gone. She had been chipped down like a delicate sculpture into something wholly inert, a non-threat, and then stuck into a little pocket of the Earth, probably to die.

Had she done just that? Died? A part of the neural network of a human, let alone any creature that walked the Earth and was worthy of their continued proliferation and evolution, was the ability to resist outside pressure – to fight, to flee if necessary, but she had froze instead. Ever since she lost Montraie, lost Six, she had stood in the same spot, waiting. It was not something she would ever code a Blue to do. Standing got you eaten. Montraie and Six, yes, had fought against the predatory forces that be, and maybe they had been devoured, but hell, they had fought! She didn't have anything, but she was human, she was living, and perhaps in that there was something worth her time and effort and energy, even if she had little, whatever she had left, deserved to be put wholeheartedly in resisting forces that questioned that. To say that, yes, there was something worth not laying down and relinquishing oneself for.

“It's not right!” His head flipped back as soon as she shouted this for witnesses.

He tightened his grip on her wrist, but she continued.

“Why should they just be ‘had’, just because they didn't play the same game that everyone else is playing? This is their home, and they should fight until there's nothing left here with everything they've got! It's not about tricking people, it's about me believing in these people and the community they've built here, to be there for one another, to support one another, and to make the best and keep fighting through each day in a world that has made it clear that it doesn't want them. You might be on some con game but I *believe* in these people. I'm going to see it through. Now give me my hand back.”

She threw her hand down one more time, breaking entirely free from his grasp, and immediately pushed him off from herself.

Immediately, he shouted back at her, “You care so much, but what the hell do you contribute here? Not a damn thing. Don't give me that shit.”

“You're right, I know. But let this be my penance.”

When Aiyana reached her room, there was another figure waiting for her in the dark. Great. However, this figure was holding a glowing rectangle, and leaned against the wall with crossed arms.

“Took you long enough,” Micaela said.

“Sorry, I was preoccupied.” Could he have gripped any tighter? Her wrists hurt, and she immediately began soothing them with a gentle rub.

“Was that Milo?”

“Yeah.” She pulled out her key and opened the door to her closet, where Ayan lie in the dark, resting. She ushered Micaela in, who stepped in before closing and locking the door behind herself.

As soon as the door shut, Aiyana kneeled and punched the top of a boxy computer, which wasn’t loud but did open at her behest, and began digging in it, before pulling out the microbot and a magnet. She sat criss crossed and began playing with it in the dark, dragging the magnet around it in her hand and pushing it about.

The phone still clutched in her hand as her only source of light, it could nearly be felt that Micaela rolled her eyes at this display. “I know you’re not that old, Aiyana, but it’s kind of embarrassing watching you play with a toy right in front of your literal son.”

“It’s not a toy,” she whispered back, not even bothering to look up. “No different from watching you mess with guns.”

Micaela plopped down on the floor next to her. “It’s not the same. What, is it magnetic or something? It’s stupid.”

“Yeah, but it’s not quite that... it’s like it moves because of magnetism itself. Like I said before, this could be a huge deal.”

They sat in silence for a moment as she twiddled with the microbot, its motion never slowing, but following the control of the powerful magnet she held and dragged across her palm. Micaela sat with her head hanging, tapping at her screen briefly before letting it fade into its pure white illumination once more.

“So... tonight.”

Aiyana mumbled, “Yeah?”

“Was that a part of you, ‘playing your part’?”

She set down the magnet and the microbot on the concrete beside her where her thin makeshift mattress and plush blankets did not fall, before turning to Micaela. “No. It wasn’t.”

“Obviously. I’m asking why.”

“Why what?”

“Why the outburst? Why even speak at all?”

She sighed, scratching at her forehead. “I didn’t want to say anything at all.”

“Right, so why did you—”

“It was like I had to.” Aiyana’s hands extended in front of her, wrists still sore from being bound and tied down. She balled them into fists. Above her and to the left, she could make out the faint outline of Montraie’s portrait, where he floated in and out between the stagnant bark of the trees which stretched to the heavens and the thin and fluorescent green leaves. Ever the hero, and what did he have to show for it? Where was he now? Not with his fiance and baby, for sure. Perhaps his story would be half redeemable if he had just made a new family elsewhere. But she knew his heart. A heart of valor and empathy in a world which did not honor the virtue of such impassioned displays. Even if she wished to not know, she knew that in her shoes, he would not have run from this. He would act.

“And I know, Micaela. I understand that I have an uncanny, unmatched ability to do... *something*. There’s just no telling if that ‘something’ will be enough. And what that something will be, I’m not really sure, either.”

Aiyana reached forward again, picking up the magnet and microbot once more to toy with. “But I know that the Folksmen deserve to stay here, and I know that the Enterprise is trying to wipe them out. They... they’re using the Blues to do the dirty work for them. Programming them specifically to do that. Such a terrible way to use technology that has such... infinite potential.”

She paused. “It wouldn’t have been right of me to pretend that I don’t see what they’re trying to do. I’m not a hero, but I don’t want to be a monster, either.”

“How do you know?”

All the cards were on the table. She hesitated, but ultimately knew it would all be revealed soon enough. “... I went to REIT for college.”

Before her mouth had time to close after releasing the word “college”, Micaela gasped loudly. “REIT? No way. I can’t even fathom going to college, let alone REIT.”

Half to escape the sycophancy that inevitably came from mentioning those four letters and half to finish her own thoughts quickly, she continued with little but a nod, “ I studied computer science. Every weekday, I went to class and then I spent four hours working in a lab, building the latest technology in computer science and working with the top computer scientists around. I was on a full-scholarship for it, so no, I was never rich.”

“So you were in college and pregnant? I bet that was a lot.”

“No, I started at REIT when I was sixteen.”

“*Damn!*” Illuminated by her phone resting on her criss-crossed legs, shock was written into Micaela’s face. “*Sixteen?* Sixteen. Now isn’t that something? You’re just speedrunning through life, huh? Woowwww. You’re a big deal. Why aren’t you up and working on Southside or something?”

“Oh, I dropped out. And then I met Montraie, well, again. And then I had Ayan. And now I’m here with you, yay!” Aiyana smiled sweetly at Micaela, whose mouth still hung ajar.

“... Why?”

Her smile faded. Echoes of her father’s pleading rung in her head. How could someone give up such an opportunity? That she should be grateful, that she should have seen it all through. Had they not worked hard enough? And to let their work go to waste, their backs and knees and knuckles all broken and worn to bone scraping on bone and electrifying their nerves, just to launch a star that would ultimately fall from the sky. There never seemed to be a good enough answer. Compassion was not rational.

“Because what they were doing wasn’t right. I couldn’t continue contributing to it and be okay with myself. They’re trying to find new ways to make life easier for the upper class folk and harder for everyone else. It’s not right.”

Silence took the room once more. After picking at her legs for a moment, Micaela asked, “Like what?”

Her second least favorite question. She laughed when Micaela asked it, because it was yet another one she did not have a sufficient answer for. “Funny that you ask. There are some things that I don’t remember.”

“What?” Micaela’s eyebrow lifted. “... You got amnesia?”

“A little. There are blocks of time I spent in lab that I don’t remember. Like, remembering getting there at two, leaving at eight, and missing everything in between. I’m sure that me forgetting those things was intentional on their part. I still know most of what they taught me, but there’s something missing.”

“Sounds intentional.”

“It definitely was. Whatever information it was, it was either incredibly damning or incredibly useful. Leaning towards the latter, though.”

Another bout of silence, where they could not seem to quite make eye contact. Micaela’s legs seemed quite compelling to her apparently, so clearly she had something to say.

Oh, so she did. When Micaela was ready, she muttered, “It’s commendable.”

Aiyana retorted, “What? Them stealing my memory from me?”

“No,” Micaela responded. “Having the nerve to step away from doing that. You could have secured a great job, and you wouldn’t be in this shithole with me. Life could’ve been better than this for you.”

Aiyana’s smile now was a little crooked, twisted. “Whaaat? We’ve got it nice here. We’re cooking in this A/C free closet I sleep in, and we just had some meat for the first time in months.”

When Micaela did not even crack a tiny grin, her laughter ceased, and she waited for her instead.

“I don’t know that I’d do it,” Micaela added after a moment. “Standing on your beliefs is easy until you don’t have anything to eat. I think... if I had a chance at life better than this, I might just have to take it.”

Aiyana sighed. “I get it. It’s the path of least resistance. You’re not always a hero for rejecting it, though! Sometimes you could just be stupid.”

Suddenly, Micaela shot up from the ground, her phone slipping out of her lap and onto the blanket beneath. “But! We’re here now.”

Beneath her, Aiyana stared up. “... Right.”

Unphased, Micaela continued, “And we just might have the tools to fix this.”

“... Maybe.”

“So, we’re going to do what we can to keep this home and survive!” This last part she exclaimed, waving her right fist in the air. “If AI is their weapon of choice, they have no idea what the hell they’re dealing with!”

At this Aiyana couldn’t help but chuckle, waving her down instead. “Shut up, you idiot! What are you on... about to wake up Ayan and all.”

Micaela fell back onto the floor, shrugging before laying down. “Well, I’m just saying!” Aiyana stuffed the microbot and magnet back down into her nightgown pockets before following suit and laying on her side too, her eyes still fixated on Micaela. Their whispers faded to a still silence in the tiny closet as the night grew deep.

The Dowry of Rose

In the days that followed, Austin rose early in the morning, before any vendors were even out in the corridor and before breakfast had been made, to head into Midtown and plead with the bank to allow them to stay beyond the eviction date they had been given. Because he most readily had a nice and speedy means of transport, he would call upon Rome to take him, and the two men were absent much of the day, nowhere to be seen during business hours. Without fail, each and every single day he was compelled to go

out by Evelyn, Austin would reenter the Den around six in the afternoon with his head hanging and head straight to Evelyn's room. He did not join the twenty-somethings for dinner, immediately heading to bed rather than conversing, despite the deep curiosity in the space.

Because Evelyn, any financial planners, and especially Austin did not divulge the specifics of the disappointment written into their faces, gait and everyday demeanor, people continued to set up shop, haggle and hustle, cook, clean, repair things around the Den, and go into town for business as usual, for as long as they had not heard it they could not see any reason that they should in fact do anything otherwise. Yet as it were, in those days the burden of a heavy mystery, indecipherable, sat on the heads of the people. In her conversations at various booths around the great corridor, which she visited to keep her time occupied and her situational awareness sharp and swift, conversations carried as normal until the future crept in, beginning and trailing off to an undefined end.

It seemed the burden of the mystery had barred them from the ability of promise. On the preceding Wednesday from the Saturday they had been served eviction, she visited Niamh in the tailor storefront for a pair of children's overalls she had commissioned from her only a little less than a week ago, as Ayan was always growing out of clothes as soon as he got them. Although she didn't press, as soon as she mentioned the overalls, Niamh began, "It shouldn't take me any longer than...", a sentence she would never finish with anything definitive. After sighing, looking at her work table, and then at Aiyana in the eyes, she continued, "It usually doesn't take me any longer than a couple of hours, and you're third on the list. It should be done soon."

'It should be'. 'It usually'. A bunch of hypotheticals, and she couldn't blame her, because it was all that could be given anymore. In the new place, would there be space or opportunity for these activities? They discussed it at dinner and in the hallways, where they gathered in small groups with enough caution to not upset any of the financiers. Surely there was a catch, something they would be expected to do, and surely it would be of great difference from what they did in the Den, because outside of it, the Enterprise had long since replaced their crafts. Truth be told, long ago, in her presence, e-

textiles, so that the value of your clothes being handmade was trumped by having electronics within them, generated by Enterprise technology, that made them ten times more versatile.

When news spread the following day, no one knew who had leaked the already obvious results or lack thereof: that the Enterprise and the bank had yet to listen to their request to work things out, and for leniency. Austin was still tight-lipped, even though people poked and prodded at him as soon as he arrived, now earlier in the day and with a stern defeatism and stiff gait, pushing past people like a mobile brick wall as he crossed through. Like Telephone, stories circulating about the Blue in the blue suit varied in content and composition, yet all of them concluded with the same image — artificial intelligence standing atop men. Of course, it was the wrong image, but she figured she had said enough and ate her food while listening all the same. The meat that most people had had already been eaten earlier in the week. Some had jerkied their own, but there was no telling if it would stay good with time, as the A/C had not come on since.

It was when their phones and holochips lost charge that the situation grew in its dire nature. As soon as they entered the second night enveloped in a familiar darkness, many resolved to be moderate in their phone usage, understanding the darkness they would live in would be a long one. However, this same darkness meant that to navigate past nine pm, the illumination of one's phone was a necessity. Even with all battery-saving features in place, in two to three days, most were out of their phone as a resource. This ushered in the ridiculous practice of having to ask carpenters and other tradesmen for their flashlights to use the bathroom or, for those with less shame, to traverse to a friend or lover's place.

She wasn't sure exactly what it was that made people tired. Maybe it was the limitations of the strict, non-perishable meals that could not be prepared ahead of time or stored, meals that were even devoid of something as simple as rabbit meat. Perhaps it was how the density of the showers meant they were full all the time, as no one wanted to shower when it got dark. People would station outside of the shower rooms, and if they got distracted and moved from the queues that would form, suddenly insisted that they had, in fact, intended to use the shower all along, and get out of their way. Or perhaps it was the lack of distraction. Now, when Micaela became pissed at someone for getting in her way of doing

something, as she tended to do, she no longer possessed the agency to lose herself in a virtual world or show of some sorts projected directly onto her corneas by the holochip. In the Den there were the most widespread phenomena of clear, unclouded pupils Aiyana had ever seen in her life, yet there was nothing to cherish or find beauty in, for these eyes were drawn together and tight with a buried rage at all these things.

People began fighting. On Friday, there were two fights amongst men, one about a price haggling gone wrong and the other a shower dispute fully escalated. As Hasil broke up the former of the two, it was evident that this was simply the commencement of wrath to come. Over the next week, the number of scuffles and brawls exploded, so much so that Gueneverie opted to cancel school for the children in the Den, to keep them out of the corridor, which had become a boxing ring by then. After a spinning plate thrown like a frisbee almost scalped Aiyana, saved simply by ducking in the nick of time, she resolved that she would stay in her closet until news got back about whether or not they would be leaving, or the electricity came back on. It was unbearable to watch them fight at this point, as now there was no access to the more advanced, electronic-based medical tools which would patch them up in no time. Who had the money or the supplies to print organs or tissue when the skin was sliced and the torso was punched and punctured?

Micaela, who was facing the chaos with a handy pistol on her left hip and the propensity to use it, generously lended her assistance by delivering Aiyana and Ayan whatever meals had been scraped together each day. She even delivered soaked, piping hot towels by which they could take a meager bird bath. In exchange, Aiyana opened her space in the night, as the heat rose and made living on the second floor unbearable sometimes. They would play cards or makeshift children's games with Ayan, who always understood the gimmick too soon and kept them on their toes trying to find new ways to entertain him. They went to the bathroom to relieve themselves, of course, but this was often at night and rushed, with the use of Rome's flashlight. Imagine having to convince a four-year old to contain their bladder. It was absurdity at its finest level.

Within two days of barricading in the closet, she was going stir-crazy. Her legs ached and craved an actual walk around the premises, and the stagnant air drew her to feel ill at moments. She found herself praying to whoever was watching above her to *move*, to do *something*, for it was clear they were underperforming their duties.

On the second Friday of Austin's daily pilgrimage to Midtown, in her sleep there was a great trembling from side to side. The shaking lasted for long enough to creep into her dream, where a boat threw her back and forth from one edge to the other. After her brain tired of incorporating new ways of distracting her eyes from opening, she cracked one open. The shaking ceased and Ayan stood above her, his face creased at the eyebrows with concern.

"Good morning, baby," she muttered, rubbing her eyes. "What time is it... like seven or something?"

"It is eleven fourteen a.m.," he answered, before plopping down right on top of her stomach. Involuntarily, she let out an 'oof' sound as soon as she bore his weight. That's right. Coupled with the fact that she didn't have windows in her tiny closet, staying in there all day was messing with her sense of time, and only by bathroom breaks could she tell what part of the day they were in.

She sat up, and he slid from her lap to the middle of her legs. "Oh, I'm sorry, baby. How long have you been up?"

"A while."

Hopefully they hadn't missed breakfast. She needed to brush her teeth, although it seemed like Ayan already had. If Micaela had stopped by earlier, why couldn't she have woken her up too? Of course, this wasn't her responsibility, but it would have been helpful. She hadn't stayed the night this time around. And if she hadn't woken her up either, it meant there were no updates that had gotten around during the night.

"Have you eaten?" She placed her hand on his head, flipping around his short dreads from side to side before gently rubbing his cheek.

"Yes! We need to go outside, mama!"

“Don’t worry, Micaela will bring me food at lunch time, since it looks like I missed breakfast. I’m not too hungry right now, anyways.”

“I *know*, mama. We need to go *outside!*” He bounced on Aiyana’s leg. Poor baby. He was nearly bursting at the seams, and had finally cracked, it seemed. On the day she decided that they would be staying in, she had let him know that they would not be going anywhere, and he, empathetic as ever, had not once asked her to leave unless he needed to use the bathroom. And once he had, he was more than happy to oblige and come right back to the room once he was done. However, she had known it was only a matter of time until he finally said something. It was commendable that he held out as long as he did. He was a kid, after all. She hated to keep him in. None of this was fair for a kid.

“I told you, honey, we have to stay inside so we can be safe. Soon, we will be able to be back in the hall with everyone else. If you want to run to the bathroom real quick, you can come with me! I’ve gotta go brush my teeth. You’ll see some people while we walk.” She smiled at him. ‘Soon’ was vague enough – no promises. With no updates from last night, she really didn’t know when ‘soon’ was.

“No, mama. I mean *outside*. In the sun.” He turned and pointed behind himself and directly in front of her, to where the gardens and apiary were, bordered in by the great wall around the entire den. Hmm... perhaps not a terrible idea. Most of the fights and angry campers had contained themselves to the grand corridor, and truthfully, it was walking through them that was truly the problem. The farmers and beekeepers hated the children running through them, but Ayan wasn’t a child who liked running around, and didn’t pick at things, either. If she could make it out of her room and past the kitchen, it wasn’t half a bad idea. Was it that much further from the bathrooms, anyways? And a chance to stretch her legs and feel the sun toast her skin to her dark, deep summer shade... nice.

She grabbed his tiny hands and squeezed them tenderly. “You want to go into the gardens? We can do that.”

His eyes lit up. “I want to go to town! We need to go to town!”

She laughed at this proposition. Had he actually enjoyed Cricket’s playground that much after all? “I can do the garden, baby. Deal or no deal.”

“Deal!” He leapt up, and so did she.

After slipping past the kitchen and into the garden with little incident, planned at the perfect time in the afternoon, she traversed through the gardens hand-in-hand with her baby, who, always well-behaved, was keenly interested in reading the tags separating one garden from the next. Not only was his advanced reading level shocking, but he was also sharing the information he gathered from the tag verbatim with his imaginary friend, who he had cleverly decided was also named Ayan. Because she appreciated his creativity and thought it was a bit cute, she had questioned it little, but it was such that it seemed he was oftentimes thinking aloud, or was speaking in third-person for an unknowable reason. There was no comprehensive manual on parenting, but God knew she needed the page for this subsection.

Although Ayan was certainly creative, other women or their children had had the same idea, as she passed many children beside their mother, enjoying the scorching sun and the vibrant greens of the garden. She passed one, who looked her in the eyes once, down again, and then in the eyes once again, before giving her a small smile that seemed uncertain. Other than the fact that the Den had grown too chaotic for her to be inside of it, these looks had become commonplace and encouraged her to walk even more quickly to and from the bathroom to her room. It wasn't anger, no – nor was it solidarity. Like everything else, it was a look of being up in the air with no place to land, a look of uncertainty. Would her protest prove useful and revolutionary, or would it end futile and damming? That was what this look told her, and when she saw their own little ones, chubby-cheeked and bright-eyed, she understood.

After her second lap around the garden and warily passing by the apiary, she spotted a great mess of long, bright blonde curls engulfing a stern face as she neared the door once more.

“What's up, Hasil? What's got you out here?” She stopped walking as soon as she spotted him, immediately prompting Ayan to tug at her arm for the commencement of their third lap. He was leaned up against the wall with his hands in his pockets, looking past everything.

Of course, he immediately looked down at her as soon as she spoke. “Hey, Aiyana. What do you got going on? Taking the kid on a walk?” He looked down at Ayan, who continued pulling.

She nodded. “Yeah. You know I’ve been hiding out ever since people started losing their minds. We needed to stretch our legs a little bit.”

“Cool, cool. Me too.” Still looking at Ayan, he asked her, “... You want to keep walking? Seems like the kid does. I’ll follow.”

She ruffled his hair yet again. “Yeah. He loves plants, just like his dad. C’mon.” With her head she nodded towards the plants again, and began walking; Hasil followed.

It was not long before Ayan pulled his hand from her entirely. “Ayan wants to go categorize the plants! I’m gonna be right back!” He ran off, meticulously sticking to the paths carved out by the farmers, every step he took a calculated one.

Hasil chuckled. “He’s interesting. Great kid, though. You’ll have to show me how you raised him so well sometime soon.”

She shook her head as she felt her face rush with heat. “Ah... yeah... I don’t know how! He’s just a great kid, that’s what it is.”

A moment of silence fell between them, but it was expected, as Hasil was not one for words. However, it was a single moment before he picked up the conversation again by himself, walking closer to her side rather than behind her, as he had been before.

“People have asked me about you. Me, Rome, and Micaela.”

She stopped and he stopped just as fast as her, looking down at her as she looked up at him. *Asked* about her? Certainly, there were probably people wondering what was wrong with her in the first place, but *asked* about her?

“Asked about me? Oh, why?” She continued walking.

“Say they want to know what you’re thinking. They don’t know you and they were shocked to see you speak in the first place. Now they want to know why you’re hiding. What you’ve got planned. If you’ve got a dog in this fight after all.

Without a word, she scoffed. Dog in this fight? It was the same as all the others – she didn’t want to lose *this*. In town, there weren’t spaces like this. There were no gardens and no bees and no people

walking in them. There were parks on the Southside, yes, but they weren't going there, and for those, you had to pay a hefty fee to walk in them. Life didn't exist like this outside of this home she found. Perhaps Milo was right; because she had yet to contribute anything here, how could she possibly want to protect it with the same vigor that they had? To them, she must be a mooch anywhere she could be placed.

In the mystery the Den folk had generated around her person, there was opportunity. She had bought into it a little herself, unknowingly, by not speaking to anyone but a few key players, but for the most part, it had been generated in those two weeks. Why was she hiding? What was she planning, thinking? It was too uncanny, yet uncomfortably familiar, to have so many eyes on her.

"Right," he spoke after a while. "I thought the last one was a stupid question. You live here too. Being new doesn't change that."

She didn't say anything. At least he heard her.

"I was surprised to see you in the middle, talking, too. Never seen you talk that much. Said what a lot of us were thinking, too." He paused. "I've been here since I was seventeen. Twenty-three now. My pops brought me here."

He stopped to view the garden of tomatoes, full of growing vines propped up on wooden sticks. "He... he was a farmer. It was just me and him. It was a terrible time to be a farmer. No one can keep up with the Blues, and it was so easy to replace farmers. We used to sell at the farmer's market, but we couldn't compete with their prices. Started growing for just ourselves, but that wasn't gonna keep us from losing the farm. So we went into town and he couldn't get a job anywhere. They said he had no education, but if he tried to get it, education was too expensive. Said he had no experience, though he had worked every day of his life. He was always... so nice about it. Said things were just supposed to be that way. It wasn't about being fair or not. Was about change."

He turned from the plants to her. "He said that, and then he dropped me off here and blew his brains out right outside the wall. With my gun, 'cause I took his. Believe that." He shook his head and returned to eyeing the tomato plants, jerking with either a chuckle or from pure pain.

She, however, had not stopped looking at him. Her mouth slightly ajar with no words to placate him, her eyebrows furrowed with pain no words were put to. Anything she could say, certainly it would be stained red with her own deep wounds from her father. The urge to tell him that yes, she understood! Her father was the same way. Showing his bravest face, talking about how the world was changing, and believing her somehow fit to brave it although he no longer existed in it. But it wasn't about her.

He didn't even lift his head, looking instead at his hands and the veins in his arms. "I don't want to leave here. I don't trust the world outside of this. This *is* what's left of the world — but I think we're gonna lose that all. There's so much to protect here, yet I feel so... powerless to do that."

She placed her hand on his shoulder, and he finally looked at her. "Whatever happens, we're going to do what we can do, and that will have to be good enough. Because that... that's all that we can do."

He smiled at her lightly. "I hope you're right."

"It's the people that make this place great. Everyone brought their passions, intelligence, skill and knowledge together to make a home. Hopefully... if we had to, we could do it anywhere." She, too, would bring all of it in, no matter where they landed.

At that moment, Ayan torpedoed into her right hip, breathing heavily. She bent down to greet him, wiping off bits of dirt and dust that had caught on his cheeks and round nose.

"Did you fall?"

Still out of breath, he talked through anyways, "Yes. But I ran around and Ayan came up with all the groups, by the colors and the leaves and if it was a fruit or a veggie." His face swelled with pride and joy.

"Wow! That's amazing, hun. I'm so proud. Are you ready to go back inside?"

"No!" He pulled away from her grasp.

"Sun's about to go down soon. How about five more minutes?"

He shook his head. "I don't ever want to go inside."

How unusually testy was he today? This was probably the norm for other mothers with four-year-olds, but he was so compliant normally. And of course, any child loved running outside, but ever was a strong word. “Are you afraid of the people inside? Don’t worry, they’re not going to hurt you. Hasil can walk us to our room, too.”

He shook his head. “I’m not scared.”

Stir-crazy. She got it. “Look. We can come out here every day when it’s not too hot, okay? I promise.”

He looked up at her in silence, before taking her hand. Seemed like he didn’t need five more minutes anymore. With Hasil accompanying them, they headed back to the room without a word.

Later in the evening, Micaela dropped off their food, wishing them well and staying just a bit to kiss and tell about the general drama and fights of the day, but nothing of any actual importance before she departed for the evening again. It had rained earlier in the week, so the last couple of days had been more temperate than usual, which meant the sun scorched a little less in the day and it got colder at night than it usually did. Because of that, she had been left alone with her baby most nights, this one being no exception. They slept, ate quickly, and went to shower quickly while everyone else was still eating, chattering and arguing. As soon as they reentered the closet and lotioned, they fell asleep once more. After days of little movement, walking under the hot sun was enough to wipe them out during the night, but she enjoyed snuggling up in the coolness that had set in the Den late in the evening.

She slept long, more deeply and soundly than she had in a long time, bundled up in her blanket beside her baby. As she sunk more deeply into her slumber, a great warmth grew at her side, spooning her and encasing her in heat from head to toe. It clutched at her chest, pulling her into the crescent its body formed, and she relented, letting herself be molded at its will. She dreamed of him all the time, and now her locs were sticking to his close shaven stubble, his large arm falling over her shoulder and then wrapping around again to pull her in tight to him. Yes, it was his warmth – it swallowed her, it enraptured her, it was intoxicating itself. To feel his heat, if only just one more time, to see his smile, crooked and

full of open face grillz, hands adorned with thin gold rings, all coupled with a dad sweater that felt entirely out of place.

Quickly she grew warmer and warmer at the thought of this, until the toasty heat of love crackled at her ears, cheeks, and nose, as if she were sitting directly in front of a bonfire. Hotter. Her breaths became laborious, pushed in and pushed out with her best efforts. Idly resting became a chore rather than a reality. Hotter. Too hot. *“Let me go!”* She flipped to her side, prepared to order him to do such.

“Mama, fire! Fire! Fire!”

As soon as Aiyana jerked to her side, she abruptly exited her dream to rolling clouds of black smoke that swam to the ceiling and circled. The room itself was burning with an orange glow, illuminated by the flames that crawled in. Immediately she sat up from the blanket, causing Ayan to crash to the ground. *Oh, my dear God!*

When the same heat at the ceiling began swirling around her head, she fell on her hands and feet, grasping at Ayan to keep him situated at her level. Her temples pounded as much as her head did, but she mustered all into immediately beginning to crawl on the floor in the dark, with Ayan’s hand balled up in her left, which she used to maintain balance, and the other one stuck directly out of front of her as she roughly swung it from her right side to her left side and back, desperate for any sign of the door.

When her hand hit the heated up drywall frame, her fingers walked to the side and then immediately up the door. Almost before her fingertip even made contact with the handle she felt the scorch of the metal bore deep into her skin, prompting her to yelp before she even noticed. In a split-moment decision, she pulled two opposite ways at her nightgown with all her might until the fabric tore in half at the loose skirt area. As soon as the pink patch gave way into her hand, she wrapped the fabric around her hand at mach speed, and then slammed her hand on the handle once more and threw her full weight from her hands and feet into the door. She went flying when the door gave way, her body slamming on the ground directly in front of her closet and banging her head against a hard beam, behind her. Dazed for a few seconds, she came to and saw her baby directly in front of her. He was curled up, coughing, and in that moment she realized she had briefly stopped breathing herself, letting out a huge

gasp for air before immediately leaping towards him and covering his body with her own. Here, she felt less heat and smoke; it seemed there was something in the distance where the smoke was actively escaping to, and it had therefore not completely overcome the corridor.

With him underneath her, she began crawling them towards the beam. Reaching it again, she found that it was a collapsed beam, likely from the floor above, and that it was just as stagnant and sturdy as it had been before. She placed her hands on either side and pushed with all her might. It did not budge. She repeated this, hands further apart, upright and firmly on her knees, and pushed longer. The beam resisted her force against burns forming on her palm, sending sheer pain shooting into her hand and arm. Without choice, she let out a scream as she pushed on and on. It did not budge.

She fell on her fours again, panting again. Here the air was clearer and less condensed with smoke, possibly bearable if even for a moment. The fire was further away. Just under her, there was maybe just enough space that a small child could squeeze through it.

She prodded at him. His coughing attack had ceased. “Baby. Go on that side and try to pull yourself through, okay?”

He curled more tightly into a ball underneath her. “I don’t know, mama.”

“You don’t have to know,” she promised. Her voice grew softer by the moment. “You just have to try.”

“... Are you going to come with me?”

She felt another tug at her heart. Had the fire started long ago, or was it a new phenomenon she caught right as it began? She heard him, herself, and the flames, and that was all. Her lungs, throat, and tongue would be covered by a generous layer of soot, soon, and by then, he could run out of the Den entirely.

“... Right behind you, baby. We’re running out of time.”

He crawled from under her and nodded at her, his little silhouette standing with a particular pride. Just as she thought, he slipped under the beam and was on the other side in no time.

“Your turn, mama,” he shouted at her from beyond the beam.

Could she climb it? Unlikely. There was no place to grip anything, to pull herself up and over in the first place. She arched her back and stuck her hand through the opening, waving it at him. “Right behind you. But you have to run right now, baby. Run!”

After a moment, she heard his footsteps begin pattering on the floor further and further away from her. Still halfway through the gap between the beam and the floor, she exhaled deeply. The air was sickening. She was able to push the upper half of her body nimbly through the hole, but when she reached pushing her hips through, it became a lost cause. Torso now on the other side, she pushed and pushed against the beam and wagged her legs, as if it would sneak them past the beam. Wedged underneath now, she allowed her legs to stop pushing; they flattened against the floors. She laid her head directly on the floor, for the air was cleanest and freshest there, and closed her eyes to rest.

“Aiyana!”

Her head jolted up, and she scanned her smoke-covered surroundings for movement. There! Towards her, a figure dashed through the gray clouds, coming closer and closer until two hands rested atop her hair and lifted her head off the floor.

“Aiyana!”

She looked up at the figure, and its mess of black hair. “Micaela.”

“Ayan told me you were still here! I’m gonna... I’m gonna go get you help! I’ll be right back, I promise.” With that, she took off into the smoke once again. Aiyana rested her head back down. Certainly, a dream. Things were okay like this.

In a couple more minutes, she heard a great rumbling of boots coming towards her. The air had cleared a bit, and through that she saw several pairs of legs. Micaela’s face came into sight right in front of her own.

“I brought some guys this time... they’re going to lift the beam for just one second and Rome and I are going to pull you as fast as we can, okay?”

With a head that felt as if it weighed nearly a million pounds, she nodded and stuck out her hands. Micaela took one, and Rome, the other.

“One... two... three!” With several pairs of boots slamming onto the floor below, the weight of the beam lifted from her back, and immediately she flew forward, collapsing onto her rescuers. Finally, she could wiggle her legs and have her eyes watch as she did just that.

As they released her hands she stood on her own two feet, a free woman again. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

They nodded. On the other side now, she could see multiple gaping holes in the glass ceiling, smoke pouring out from them and aiding to clear out the smog that had accumulated in the space just before. From this, glass was strewn all around the floor and a step could not be taken in good faith in any direction without crunching on it; to move through, she would have to dance. It was then that she looked to see how her legs had been sliced and swole with droplets of blood. My God, did her baby have his shoes on?

“Where’s Ayan?” She grabbed Micaela's arm.

“He’s outside already. Hasil took him to Guen.”

She exhaled deeply, closing her eyes tight. A nightmare averted. “Did he have... did he have shoes?” Her voice warbled.

“I think so,” Rome responded. “Seems he was fully dressed somehow.”

Aiyana nodded, wiping at her tears. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

She released Micaela’s hand, only to be grabbed herself and pulled forward. “We have to go.” Micaela bent down to the ground, picking up a semiautomatic rifle in her other hand and continuing to walk. Pulled into Micaela’s hastiness, she was now tasked with leaping about haphazardly to avoid cutting her feet, although this could not be entirely avoided. At her sides, she saw as several of the men joined walking beside them, and began shooting her gratitude at them as well.

Even this could not distract her from the sheer amount of destruction. The second floor walkways had nearly entirely collapsed and plunged down onto the first floor, covering up much of the debris of tables, chairs, and tools scattered all across the first floor. She could not register a single booth, a single vendor table, a single shop there intact as it had been when she went to sleep that night. Water was

bursting from pipes as if they were fountains in a downtown district, but with all of the force and none of the grace or beauty. They shot through haphazardly, creating a soup of wood and drywall and concrete and everything that was no more. Walking became easier as they made it into the grand corridor, because she could step on the second floor that had collapsed and avoid some of the glass below. With how it had fallen, it was unbelievable that Micaela was still as sturdy as she was. Her black hair was coated in a thin layer of white drywall powder, soot, and some concrete that came into an ash gray dye job all together.

On the periphery, there were fires all around her. They began to peter out at this point, but the sheer number of them seemed unusual, as if they had been started separate from one another at entirely separate times.

After she had taken in as much as she could, her eyes straining from how wide they were being held, she asked Micaela and the men, “*What the hell happened?*”

“Attack,” Micaela answered.

“... What?”

“Attack!”

In a fraction of a second, Micaela jumped back at her as a single, bright orb of light descended from the sky and came to the ground at a great distance from them, its descent so gentle. The luminosity lit up the faces of all around her, so brightly that they all covered their faces from the whiteness that would consume them all as soon as the orb swole to engulf much of the room and then exploded. In the little that the light did not completely consume, great chunks of concrete flew across the sky and escaped them from the heavens, spewed in every direction imaginable. In the light, all movement seized, all frozen in the trajectory of the bright light. She was catatonic, then, she was airborne. Soaring from the light’s explosion, she fell back down on her back into a sea of darkness.

There was no telling how long she had been out. She woke up, splayed down on a rocky and uneven surface, her legs dangling off and chunks of rock digging into her skin and flesh where she had collided. Blood pumped and pounded through her head, causing her to grip at her temples with both hands and push them further down in desperation. Everything she could see, anything in every direction that

there was, was blocked to some degree by blotches of bright white splatterings in her vision. There was nothing she could hear but a great wailing siren in either ear. As her vision came back to her in full living color, she dropped her arms from the sides of her head, splaying them out on either side of herself. The rooftop was devoid of its glass ceiling, and because of its absence it was easier than ever to look into the heavens. There was a show going on, a menagerie of vibrant colors and wonders going on right above the heads and those of anyone around her that was still alive.

Beyond the lingering smog above the building, several orbs and beams of light, smaller than the one she had first seen and just as luminous, shot from the cloud and dove into the rubble of the den, sending entire hallways into orbit and plummeting down into the debris there already was, shaking the whole mallspace with the vigor of a particularly violent earthquake. Her hearing trickled in and back to her like honey in her ears, revealing the sheer cacophony of the pandemonium the Den found itself in. The loud pop of bullets flying into the air failed to trump the beams from the sky raining down on their earth-bound targets as they zapped and hissed, the combined screeches of their brute force and heat like a tornado siren implanted directly into her skull. When they hit, the air cracked like the tip of a whip and with the energy of a lightning bolt.

There was an aroma in the air of burnt meat, yet they had run out of meat, even rabbit meat, long ago. A pungent sweetness lingered on the dust that swam around explosions, catapulted into the air with sloshes of crimson fluid.

In some time, she sat up, and immediately flinched at the sight of an arm from under the rubble, waving at her. In a second she jumped to the arm in all her weakness and clutched the hand with both of her own. The hand offered no strength itself, so she placed both feet on either side of the rubble around it and tugged with all her might.

The arm was freed, and there was nothing beyond it. She flew and fell onto her back once more, the bloody stump thumping down onto her torso and staining her soft pink nightgown maroon. With great urgency she stuck her arms behind herself and slowly pulled herself up and back. Her throat could not form the scream she wished to release, and her eyes never left the stump, how the fingers were reaching

for her, how the earthquakes had caused it to jiggle so lifelike, its tattoos and the thin arm hair that had once belonged to someone who now only was. The beginning of cries exited her mouth, but never the ends of them, and because of the unbearable noise all about her, she heard nothing at all. As she finally drew her body away from the bloody stump, it fell back into the abyss it had left. It seemed to extend forever, and although it was dark, the vacancy that the stump had left revealed several arms, legs, hands and feet and fingers, and one body with its head violently mangled like a shredded red tee shirt and how it was splayed, dripping its dark fluid from unrecognizable features and matted brown, bloodied hair onto an exploded leg. Nothing there was whole.

Sitting at the top of a large chunk of the floor that had been blown upright, she drew her eyes up from the pit of death beneath her to the world beside her. At a pace of great ferocity, scores of people were firing their guns into the air, putting their hopes into bullets which soared into the fog above and promptly disappeared in their eyes. About twenty yards from her was Jaid, who bent down, desperately reloading. Yes, she was there; Aiyana knew it was her by her bone straight brown hair which was draped across her face as she struggled to load a clip into what looked to be a bolt-action rifle. As she began to stand up, the air above her gained a particular glow and then erupted with light. Instinctually she covered her hands to block her eyes, and upon removing it a moment later, Jaid was no more. Her eyes followed the edges of the rubble from one side to the other, and still she could not find where she had run off to. On unstable legs, she stood up and began walking, carefully, between large chunks of rubble and the men and women firing off endless rounds of ammunition.

She fell to the ground in front of a sticky puddle of bone fragments and slabs of flesh, enveloped in a red cloud of vapor which engulfed her, coating her hair in a generous mist and mingled with the ammunition dust from whence it came. Jaid's gun lay tattered on the side, embedded deeply with shrapnel; it did not respond to Aiyana's touch when she leaned over the puddle to tap it lightly. Nonetheless, she pulled the rifle up and close to her, holding it at her chest.

Again she felt the warmth of the beams and heard the whoosh of the live ammunition being shot, so after a moment of observation, she stood and ran briefly and rapidly towards a ditch the bombs had dug

out from the ground, leaping in with the rifle and recoiling as soon as she smacked down against the hard rock base beneath her. After she got over the aching in her body, she poked her head out from the ditch, so that only her locs and upturned eyes could be seen by anyone who cared to look for her in such chaos. There was a generous piece of concrete from the second floor leaning over the ditch, which could either crush or shield her greatly.

She looked around the vast acreage, because there was no longer a discernible outside and inside to be observed at this point. Much of the second floor had collapsed onto the first, and there were storefront gates and doors spread all across the rubble; some fighters picked these up and used these as shields against the bombs to limited success. There were tiny pops of color in the gray, smoky mess where people's rooms had fallen; cots and blankets, clothes and shoes, chairs and paper were all scattered across the rocks. Not far from her at all was a teddy bear, brown and fuzzy with two button eyes and a red bow around its neck laying abandoned on top of a slab of rock. The most color came from where Gueneverie's schoolroom had been.

Fighters seemed to run haphazardly about the place, with little specific direction. The bombs that dropped were random, shielded from view by the night sky and the smog still in the air, so that whatever was dropping them could not be seen simply by looking into the air; the luminosity of the bombs only further complicated this. She watched people scramble and hop across the debris, existing one moment and reduced to red paint painted on the rocks the next. Micaela came into view, her heart swelling with joy as she sighed a breath of relief. Her wild black hair was all about her face and through the air, some matted and bloody to her crimson forehead and the rest riding on the wind from bullets and bombs. Her legs were bloodied, her arms and her torso, but she moved with such swiftness that Aiyana deduced her well.

Aiyana shouted, "Micaela!" In competition with all the explosives whizzing about, it was not a surprise that Micaela could be so close to her, not register that she had said anything at all. Her back was still turned to Aiyana, and she continued firing into the air at where the aircrafts could possibly be.

After shouting her name a fifth time to no avail, even as Micaela continued backing up closer and closer to her ditch, she breathed in deeply to herself. Was she really going to do this? Yes, she was. Yes, she was!

With a one, two, three count, she leapt forward from the ditch and high crawled over the glass and rock beneath her until she could grasp Micaela by the ankle, careful so not to abruptly startle her. How awful it would be to catch a stray bullet from her best friend.

Micaela jerked substantially and looked down at her. In her eyes there was no clear focus, as if a stupor had taken hold of her. Upon her face, from her forehead to her chin blood had been wiped across. Aiyana lifted herself further to Micaela's hand, pulling it from her gun and beginning to lead Micaela backwards on her knees towards the ditch from where she came. Micaela's other arm, rifle still gripped within it, dangled at her side.

Aiyana stepped down into the ditch one knee at a time, using her feet to sustain her weight as she dipped further and further inside; Micaela followed with similar attention to detail in her movements, although her eyes had not moved to view their surroundings since laying eyes on Aiyana.

Fully under the concrete slab above, kneeling face-to-face in front of one another, Aiyana took Micaela's face into her hands and wiped the blood to the edges with her thumb, clearing her eyes and cheeks to its natural adobe hue. She finally shut her eyes to allow for the accumulated drops of blood on her eyelashes to be pushed away. After pinching the blood off at the ends of Micaela's face, Aiyana flicked her hands, the sludge falling onto the pavement around them.

Micaela continued staring at Aiyana, her eyes regaining a hint of light and focus after time. As Micaela looked at her, her once dead eyes now swelled with tears, sparkling as they narrowed once more. Her tears carried the stains of red away from her cheeks as they fell to the floor, and she let her rifle clatter to the ground. It was then that she leapt forward at Aiyana, planting two kisses softly on the left side of her face, one at her cheekbone and one square on her cheek, wrapping her arms around her supple frame and tightening her grip. Her head fell to Aiyana's bosom, where she buried herself deeply and her

chest trembled. Aiyana wrapped her arms around Micaela's back and laid her head down on her crown, her mouth buried in the mess of thick black hair.

"I was sure you were dead." Her throat spasmed as she talked; Aiyana began caressing lightly up and down, from her shoulder blades to the small of her back. Micaela could stay like this as long as she needed.

Micaela lifted up after a few minutes and scooted back, sitting rather than kneeling on the rough terrain. Aiyana mimicked her movements, leaving them face-to-face once again.

As soon as she sat down, Aiyana inquired, "What's going on?"

Micaela nodded and cleared her throat. "Yes. Around maybe three in the morning, a bomb was dropped right in the middle of the grand corridor. Enoch said it was a large drone. All I know is that the first bomb destroyed the roof, the floor, and brought down all the hallways on the second floor."

He had been awake? "How's Enoch?"

"Alive. Hurt bad, but stable. So after the second floor halls fell, they stopped bombing for a little while. We were going around, getting everyone we could find. So many people on the first floor got crushed. Me and all the hunters and trade workers that were left, we all started going around and finding people. Hasil found Guen, and she set the dugout over there as a place to bring people. We were looking for... survivors and then Ayan ran up to me. He told me where you were. All of a sudden, they started attacking us again."

A slow trickle materialized on the rugged floor beneath and approached her, and Aiyana followed it with her eyes to the source. "Micaela! Your leg!"

"Hm?" Micaela looked down at her lower right thigh, where a patch of her skin had been blown off entirely. She gripped at it then with wide eyes, exclaiming, "Oh? *Ow!*"

"We need to wrap it." On all fours, Aiyana tapped around the vast space of the hideout until she retrieved a piece of glass that had slipped between the cracks of the collapsed second floor. Gripping its ragged edges which pierced into her flesh with her left hand, she pulled her nightgown at its ruffled plaits on the end, cutting a sizable piece loose — most of the bottom skirt — and dropping the glass back down

to the earth. She crawled back to Micaela, sitting on her feet again when she was close enough and sticking out her hands to her foot. “Extend your legs.”

Without hesitation, Micaela stuck her legs out, giving Aiyana full access to wrap the cloth tightly around the wound, pulling so hard to keep it restrictive on her thigh that Micaela yelped. While she did so, she asked, “How are they attacking us? Who is attacking us?”

With her eyes squeezed shut and her head thrown back, Micaela forced out, “ I figure it’s drones. What they’re dropping, I don’t know. They’re blinding, they shoot fragments, and they start fires. I just can’t see the bastards.”

Drones. That made sense. There were only so many options for her second question, then. Were they really willing to stoop so low, then? “What do they want?”

With her lips pressed together until they were tight, thin, and white, Micaela muttered. “I thought you knew everything. But I can’t imagine it’s anything less than what you said the last time. That they’re trying to wipe us out.”

It didn’t make sense. Drones should have been enough to control the people; they were fighting a battle in which they so obviously had the upper hand. Why waste ammunition and resources on people they found so... malleable and disposable? Why did they want a fight in the first place? Micaela pulled herself away after Aiyana removed her hands, her arms thrown back to hold her up as she sat there with her legs thrown out to either side, looking everywhere else but at them.

“It’s a waste of our ammunition, shooting at things we can’t even see. But we need to get everyone out, and fast. If even I’m wounded like this... who knows how bad other people are?” She paused. “But they don’t care. They didn’t like us trying to negotiate, not one bit; they wanted us off this land real bad. Guess we pissed them off.”

Aiyana’s head dropped. “... I’m sorry.”

Micaela’s brows drew together. “You’re sorry? You’re sorry for what?”

“For speaking at all. That day.” She was so quiet that she could barely hear her own voice over the whizzing ammunition and the dropping bombs, even as the concrete shielded them from much of the noise.

Without a word, Micaela pulled her legs in, bearing all her weight on her knees as she hobbled towards her, sitting on her feet when she was right in front of Aiyana’s face.

“Are you stupid?”

Aiyana frowned. “Stupid?”

“Do you think you’re that damn special, and that no one was thinking exactly what you were? Yes, you’re a part of this place just as much as anyone else is, but some people have spent most of their entire lives here! Way longer than you can even imagine. There was no way in hell they were going to just let their home get taken like that! Don’t insult these people — they’re proud! You just spoke first.”

With this, Micaela got up and hobbled away from Aiyana, preferring instead to fumble with her gun with her back turned as she mumbled to herself, her head fixated on the battle out and beyond where they hid. Aiyana sat, drawn into herself, Jaid’s gun right beside her. Jaid’s moves had been desperate, they had been persistent and insistent on something — that she had not wanted to go. In a panic, she did not leap from the floor and run for dear life from the attackers to where she likely knew there would be safety, and she did not surrender or hide. Right there, trying her dearest to be as quick as she possibly could, she had stood her ground. Aiyana turned and lifted her gun, still damp with blood, and held it to her chest. Soon, she covered her face with her left arm as she still clutched the rifle with her right, refusing to allow her tears to wash the last of her away.

Without warning, Micaela threw her rifle to the side, poking her head out of the gap in the concrete and beginning to scream. Aiyana watched her for a moment, before crawling over to her. As soon as she was beside the soles of Micaela’s feet, she recognized the name called out persistently: “Hasil! Hasil! Hasil!” Aiyana placed her fingers on either side and pushed her face forward, screaming the name with all the energy in her body.

About fifty feet away from them, Hasil was in motion. His two feet never seemed to touch the ground together as he traversed the vast mess of emptiness around him, and his shots were calculated, deliberate, even if there was no telling where the drones were. His face could not be seen at all as his hair danced around it, illuminated a bright yellow by the glowing beams which never seemed to fall close to him, bombs of a lesser caliber.

Because the bombs they were dropping now were smaller and quieter than the ones before, it only took a minute of yelling before he planted both feet firmly on the ground, his head flipping about in every which direction as he tried to pinpoint the direction of their calls. Micaela and Aiyana stuck their arms out, waving them about wildly as they screamed and screamed. Finally, his head stopped moving, and he charged towards their dugout at full speed. It was only in the nick of time, when pebbles kicked up by his mad dash flew into the gap between the concrete, that they both pulled back in until they were pushed up against the opposite wall, allowing him ample space when he finally leaped in and slid inside, feet first.

Aiyana batted away at the smoke it had brought in, revealing him, still on his behind from how he had entered, gasping deeply for air as his eyes darted between the two of them. He took one last large inhale, and then turned his head, launching into a coughing attack. They observed him, mouths ajar.

After the last cough racked his body and he had hit his chest a sufficient amount of times to clear the mucus from his lungs, hoarse, he spoke, "You... you're both alive. Thank God." Although not bloodied, his tan cheeks had been smudged with a dark gray concoction of what appeared to be a slurry of concrete and smog, and his hair was poofed up and reaching in a million directions.

There was a smile audible as Micaela answered him, "I'm glad you're alive, Hasil."

Before catching herself, even though she wanted to echo Micaela first at the very least, Aiyana blurted out, "Is my baby okay?"

"He's safe. They haven't been attacking anything outside, for some reason, and the fire is only out back."

Finally she could breathe, wholly, fully. "If you took Ayan outside, why'd you bother to come back in? The attack... It wasn't too long after that."

He huffed out as he settled into what was likely the most comfortable position possible for him, which left his head nearly pressed up against the ceiling. “It wouldn’t be right of me to stay outside. I’m a hunter. If anyone can shoot those drones, it would be me. Plus my guys are still here.”

“Obviously, stupid,” Micaela mumbled at Aiyana; Aiyana shot daggers at her and then finished off her disdain with an eye roll. “Anyways, are you having any luck shooting them down?”

He shrugged. “Well, one or two. Can’t be sure if it was me that got them, though. Those things are literally invisible.”

Micaela shook her head. “Tell me about it. The smoke is so bad, you can’t see a single one of them things behind it.”

“No, I think they’re *actually* invisible. You can’t see them from outside, either, and honestly not even when they drop those flashbangs or whatever they are.”

Stare. Silence. Micaela’s head dropped. “*Invisible?*”

“Invisible,” he repeated, strain on each syllable. “It’s like the bombs are being dropped from thin air.”

She crossed her arms. “It’s because they’re black and it’s way early in the morning. They’re not invisible. They can’t be invisible.”

“Whatever. Believe what you want to believe. I know what I saw, and I ain’t seen nothing.”

“It’s called blending into the night sky, *stupid*.” He turned his head, looking to the side and at anything else that was not her.

Invisible drones? Invisibility had been tossed around her classes here and there, but never with anything tangible. Yet, what was it to make something adapt to a clear night sky in the midst of confusion?

“Wait! I’ve heard of this before!” She sat up tall with her finger up as her voice raised. Their eyes flipped over to her, as if they had forgotten she was there. She slouched back down. Too much.

“... Where?”

That was right. He didn't know. She looked down at her hands resting in her lap, fiddling her thumbs. "When I was in college, in one of my courses we talked about the ethics of having drones that were able to adapt visually and audibly to their surroundings, which would make them masters of stealth and, frankly, perfect war machines. They have superior graphics that completely cloaks them from being seen. They pitched it as a great advancement which would get boots off the ground in the United War, but we all agreed it was a bad idea that could easily be abused. It felt less like a theoretical ethics question, and more like something they were actually going to do. I just never thought they would do it here."

"... You went to college?"

"Okay, great. So those things are invisible. What can we possibly do to fight that at this point? How can I shoot something that I can't see?"

With the final question, she sank into a time, not in college, but a time after where she had asked herself the same question. There, her imagination unbound by the will of her professors, REIT, or Aron Front, she had inquired the same question of herself and the two most important men in her life. How did one fight an enemy invisible to themselves? The answer varied, of course, by its explicit application, and had not always been answered, and this was why Montraie and Six were missing today. But they had poured over their notes on the technology they built night after night and enjoyed four successful years together, evading the enemy that they could not yet fight, an enemy that continuously threatened to destroy their work. That's right! There was actually a method by which almost any drone could be detected, one that had been created by her now missing fiance. It was one of his final gifts for her, and had been more bitter than sweet in its unveiling. It was a sign of the times, of how true innovation was now the center of the Enterprise's persecution. Once, their technological acumen had been celebrated, and now, it was actively attacked. How poignant, yet pertinent. She longed for a time in which she could have told him this, her best friend. No, if he was here, he would have already thought of it; they shared a mind. Micaela was right; Montraie, too, was a complete nerd for these things.

She fell back as Micaela's hand, directly in front of her face, snapped time and time again. "It's not nap time."

Aiyana slapped her hand away. "I think I know how to locate the drones."

Accidentally in unison, which resulted in them side-eyeing one another, Hasil and Micaela asked, "How?"

"... On my phone, I have an application that can detect the carbon nanotube field-effect transistor used in the specific drone models that are common today. They're how the drone is able to process visual information so rapidly and they're likely why it's been able to attack us with such precise spatial intelligence. They're mainly used for smaller drones, but there's an advantage to having such a small computer for a larger drone that's invisible. Lessens your chances of hitting the drone's 'brain' by pure luck."

After a long time looking at her, Micaela looked at Hasil and Hasil at Micaela, both of them nodding at each other and then at Aiyana in the same rhythm. "Right, right. The transistors, yes."

Hasil added, "So your phone is charged, Aiyana?"

"Yep! I never use it. I just need to put my holochip on, and then I'll project the hologram out to where you can see it, like a radar on a ship or plane."

Her face and heart swelling with a warmth of determination, she tapped around the pockets of her nightgown. They felt flat.

She tapped again. They felt flat.

She tapped again. She felt something, floppy and not-so-flat after all. Had she folded her phone into a pocket square? Maybe, but she always lost it when she did that. How odd. Nonetheless, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the floppy square. She held it in front of her face.

In her face was a Faraday bag, in which the microbot sat with the slowest spin she had seen yet.

Hasil gasped. "What's in that? It's moving!"

Meanwhile, Micaela rolled her eyes. "Okay, it's that stupid thing again. Where's your phone?"

She shoved the Faraday bag back into her pocket, hiding in her shoulders as she lifted them to her ears. She cleared her throat and then whispered, "I... I don't have it."

Micaela threw her hands up and let them flop back down, clenching her jaw as she looked to the wall, as if to ask it if it could believe what was happening. “Are you serious? You don’t have it? Brilliant. Well, what the hell are we supposed to do now? My phone is dead and I’m sure Hasil’s is, too.”

She drew her lips into a thin line. “I know. I didn’t think to get it when I was leaving my room, I just didn’t have time. But we *really, really* need to get it.”

Arranged in a triangle, they all looked to their left and their right and briefly chose to let the bombs speak for them. After a minute’s time, Micaela touched her index finger to her nose and looked at them both.

“I’ll go,” Aiyana volunteered. “It’s my idea, and I know best where my phone would be.”

“That’s not a good idea. So many reasons why. If you die, then we can’t work the app. Plus, you don’t have shoes on.”

“I can wear Micaela’s shoes!”

He shook his head. “Did you not just hear me? You don’t even wear the same size. If you tripped and got hit, that would be really pathetic.” He picked up his rifle and moved back towards the entrance again.

“Where are they?”

She closed her eyes until she saw them. “If everything’s as it was, they’re under my pillows. I’m really not sure if you can get in, Hasil. I’ll think of something else we can do.”

He looked her straight in the eye. “I’m going to get in. Let’s pray it’s not too damaged there. The fires haven’t lasted too long for the most part. I’ll be in and out.” With that, he pulled himself up and out by pushing his whole body up with his elbows and the soles of his shoes. As soon as his feet gave one last push out, he was gone.

She pulled in her legs to her chest, resting her head on her knees as she waited patiently. Speaking to express any feelings of guilt would simply result in being chastised, and there was no point in annoying Micaela any more than she already had. At this time she was helpless, resigned to hoping some things would or would not come to be. She hoped there were still blankets and pillows to look under in the first

place, and that any bomb or shots being fired would fail to fall upon Hasil. That he would return safe and sound. Soon, she stopped praying entirely. Her prayers never came through, and she had begun to suspect especially the more specific ones. Besides, she was a woman of science! It would all simply have to come together. If she didn't believe in the hope of the situation, she had to believe in him. Yes, Hasil, but Montraie, too. That, from wherever he was, he would bring her safely back to their baby, and under his wing he would cover all those she wished to cover, too.

Micaela had crawled back up to the entrance, her face wedged between the far, narrower end of the concrete as she waited for Hasil, her hand closest to the wall and furthest from the entrance having a firm grip on her rifle. Boots clamored past, but none of them were his sharp-tipped brown ones. She rested her arms, crossed, on the pavement, and then rested her head on top of this. It had only been five minutes since they had last shared the space with him, yet with the intensity of it all and how her mind boiled over with strain and tension, it felt like an hour passed each minute that he had gone. Speaking at all would somehow raise the stress levels ten times higher than it already was, so they did not speak at all. Speaking a word at all would be to admit that he had left an absence that grew large enough for there to be space that words could fill in.

Micaela jumped, lifting her face from her forearms as two leather boots shot directly towards them. She scooted further to the side to allow space for him to hop back in, smelling strongly of charred dust and the ends of his faded jeans licked by a small coating of ash. Hasil gasped for air, yet continued scooting in, past Micaela, who just watched him, until he was right beside Aiyana, who had crawled closer into him, her hand extended. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out her phone, which was conveniently folded up into a tiny square, and her holochip. He leaned in to her, his arm and hand extended towards her. He dropped the electronics into her hand.

“Room's all ash, but these lasted.”

She sat back down and ran her hand over her phone, smoothing it out into its full size, and then placed the holochip on her temple. Upon being tapped, her visual horizon burst with a million ads, clogging her vision with a million ads she fervently began swatting away at on her phone. If you went a

day without using it, the algorithm was always there to remind you that there were a million other things that you foolishly had not bought yet, and of course, that was why you were suffering or depressed or getting a divorce or whatever other qualm you had was happening.

It took her a few minutes to clear it, but after some time she opened the application up; immediately it began scanning for the transistors in the little space they were confined to. She switched controls until it was projected onto her eyes, placing a blue film with countless dialog boxes around the edge of her peripheral vision, and crawled to where Micaela was sitting, moving around Hasil. She pulled herself up to the ledge; Hasil came after her with his gun in tow.

With her fingers on either side of her and gripping the ledge, she stuck her head out and looked to the heavens. The blank blue film that sat over her vision like a filter now suddenly burst forward with bright pinpoints like constellations in the night sky that the polluted atmosphere denied them. The dialogue boxes ran rampant with information: their altitude, weight, type, and serial number were just a few things they displayed to her. If she wanted, she could zoom in on a few; they varied in size and weight, growing from pinpoints to clear silhouettes as she moved in closer and closer, pinching in and opening her index and thumb wide from one another on her phone. Their movements were followed precisely, the radar swift in tracking its target, and the computer within them was clear as day to see.

She asked, "Are you two ready?"

In their silence was confirmation. With this, she tapped her holochip to allow the visual holographic field to burst forward from it, projected for all to see, in which each pinpoint was clear and calibrated to the sky above them. Immediately they leaned into her, until they were nearly cheek-to-cheek and in prone firing positions, with the hologram sitting directly in front of them a few feet forward and their guns pointing high into the air.

"We're limited in that we're at approximately a fifty-degree angle, but we should be shielded by the concrete behind us for as long as the drones aren't dropping big ones on us."

Micaela cocked her rifle, her eyes narrowed with a dedication to precision. "Alright. Let's take out as many of these as we can."

Hasil nodded at her, and then immediately he aimed the barrel right at a larger pinpoint; she placed her three middle most fingers at the tip of the barrel and moved it the slightest bit left, and then she tapped at the hologram itself. The hologram registered her touch, and in response, listed off the altitude of the drone amongst other things. Even with the information visible to them all, he sat there, his gun not stirring one bit. After waiting too long, the exhale from his nose hit the side of her face and his profile entered her peripheral. He was looking right at her, his eye contact unwavering and his proper posture locked. Still looking straight ahead, still holding the hologram just right for him, she nodded. He looked forward and fired.

Their world fell ever so slightly quieter as a star fell from the sky they watched on the radar into darkness. Maybe fifty yards away, a metallic clang shook the floor when the drone crashed into the hard pavement, lessening the foot traffic as the shooters above halted for a moment. A resounding lack of noise disoriented them all as the second drone crashed to the floor just a second later. The bombs stopped falling and only the boom from the shot that Micaela's rifle released, the slide of the drone that had plummeted from hundreds of feet above them onto the ground, and the crackle of distant, dying fires remained.

Still with her head facing forward and jutting out of the dugout, eyes intent on the radar map in front of them all, the dozens of lights began moving sporadically as they dashed about the night sky. The hunters in the distance, unaware of the drone movements, stood still in confusion as all around them suddenly became quiet. Silence was never a good thing. Many had already noticed her hologram, which encased the opening of the dugout like an intangible, luminescent windshield. Seizing this moment, she called out to them with all the air in her lungs, her neck bulging with the pressure placed on her windpipe, "Take cover!"

A few seized the moment to make a mad dash outdoors, no longer having to worry about the drones gunning them down as they focused more on running than defense, and others began scouting out a convenient spot where the concrete had been blown up and gnarled into a wall by which they could hide. Many, still, remained standing, oscillating between staring at the hologram she had projected and

looking into the sky, at their enemies that they could still not see through smoke that had likely cleared, and then to the visible debris that had seemingly come to be out of thin air, just to crash.

“What’s the meaning of this?” One particularly hefty hunter called out to them as he stood with his legs apart, his gun now at his side, for it seemed obsolete. All three of them sat, calling out nothing more than Aiyana had explained just a moment ago. The two at her side still had the comb of their rifles pressed up against their face, their eyes narrowed into slits as they tried to trace around the movements of the drones above them. Hasil fired at the air again, at a more reclined angle that was in front of them rather than above them, only to be swiftly dodged by the drone in question, which swung to the left to get away from his fired bullet.

No; it had not gone left! It was growing now, growing on the map and barreling towards them! She shrunk back as soon as she saw it, letting out a piercing shriek as it launched itself towards the hologram, which sank down into the dugout as she and Hasil retreated from the wind that hurled at their faces from the sheer strength of the propeller motion. When she fell into the dugout with Hasil, Micaela did not join, still posted in the same prone position she had been in before, her body stiff and unmoving. In the little time they had left, Aiyana tugged at her blouse roughly, tearing it.

With the drone seconds from impact, Micaela announced, “I can feel it — I’ve got it!” Her rifle recoiled as the bullet sailed from it, its butt hitting her in the shoulder like a rough punch as she fell back into the dugout directly on top of Aiyana. The concrete above them shook violently as the sharp scrape of metal upon rock dug into their eardrums, the rugged ground seeming to shred the drone like a cheese grater as it skidded and smashed repeatedly above them.

Micaela flipped over and pushed herself up off the ground, her eyes and mouth both wide circles as the rifle clacked on the ground, having fallen onto her chest with her. With the light of her hologram, which was still shining, she was in plain sight. Embedded into her skin were a few scattered pieces of tiny shrapnel, and Aiyana reached forward to assess this after tapping her holochip off. They were not too deep.

The three of them soaked in how hushed it was now in the remnants of the Den. Had they been breathing so heavily this whole time, as if the air would run away from them if they did not swallow it down at this very instance? They heard the hard soles of leather boots slamming against the pavement as they crossed to the South, seizing the opportunity of silence to escape the battlefield they had involuntarily become a part of. They waited until the pause of silence grew into the longest period of ceasefire they had seen in this night yet.

After quite some time of heavy breathing and hushed surroundings, Aiyana commented, "It's quiet now. They must know that we can see them now."

"Is it a trap?" Hasil asked.

Aiyana shrugged. "No more of a trap than the one we're already in. The options are that they wait us out, which they could do for an indeterminate amount of time, or we run right now and use my hologram to defend ourselves from them if they attack us."

"Which may be unlikely," Micaela added. "I think they get the message now, that we would just like to leave here peacefully. So I think they're done wasting ammo on us."

"I hope so," Aiyana mused, sitting up and looping around Hasil to where Jaid's gun is, which she clutched and brought out with her. "I'm not the most agile or well-built for this, but I still think we should all make a run for it, rather than waiting longer. We might not get a moment like this again."

Hasil nodded at her vigorously, before his eyes fell to the rifle clutched in her arms. "... What's this..."

She cradled the rifle as gently as she would hold her very baby, the little light reflecting into the dugout revealing the red tint glazed onto its wood and metal body. A gun he would recognize well, as any time she walked through the corridor, there the two were, polishing their artillery, that which was their pride and joy. He nodded with the same vigor as her, first at the rifle, and then at her, his jaw held and clutched tightly. His eyes glossed over and shimmered.

By then Micaela already had her rifle sticking out of the dugout, her arm pressed into the ground above it for support, her legs ready to bring her out.

“Are we ready?”

With record time, Micaela pushed herself up and out of the dugout and broke on the pavement from a crawl for stability into hitting a u-turn until she was out of their sight, Hasil following suit within seconds. Donning bare feet, a torn, bloodied gown, and her holochip on her temple, she tossed Jaid's gun out into the fresh air once more and clawed her way out of the dugout, too, nails digging into the debris as she pulled herself up and immediately her legs began reaching and pulling and propelling her body forward as fast as she stood. Hasil and Micaela were far ahead of her; she was beaten out by both height and athleticism, but she didn't need to beat them at all. She needed to be precisely behind them, and when she reached her top speed, she forced her legs to carry her a little faster than they had bottomed out at. It was not an easy feat, but soon she was directly behind the two.

In conjunction with her catching up, again shots began raining down on the three. They were not bombs of any sort, but metal bullets soared through the sky down at them as they sprinted towards the crumbled exit. Her eyes darted down to the bullets that shattered the glass beneath her, driving its smaller shards into her thin legs, and immediately she tapped her holochip and almost broke her neck tilting her head to the ceiling. Certainly now she looked ridiculous, charging towards the door with her neck fully extended to the sky, so she raised her hand straight up above her, placed in the beam of light that was the hologram, rotating it so that when she dropped her head down again to see right in front, the hologram was pointed to the sky once more.

With the hologram above them now like a giant shield, Micaela and Hasil aimed their rifles into the sky, although the running made them too unstable to aim properly. Nonetheless, they rotated and flipped their heads, shooting into the sky at the pinpoints that dove at them; the three drones they shot down crashed at the backs of their ankles, pulverized on impact. As they neared the entrance, the half-concrete covered doorway and the dirt terrain beyond it, a new, strong wind fluttered across the thin hairs on her arm. Her head flipped to either side of herself, at either side many hunters and those who had gotten trapped inside now ran with them. Although bullets fell upon them, there were no longer anyone

actually being hit by these bullets, and within that there was security for the number of people sprinting out to steadily increase.

At the entrance she, Micaela, and Hasil hit the boulders climbing halfway to the high door frame with hands thrown out and clawing at any weight support possible, pushing and propelling themselves forth with more fervor the further they moved up, the tan walls and light brown cracked soil calling out to them. Aiyana tapped her holochip, allowing the hologram to dissipate, and then snatched her last few reaches to the apex and immediately tumbled to the ground, hitting the tough earth with gasps of fresh air as she splayed out. Her legs drew her forward another forty yards behind her two comrades, nearing the wall, before her calves gave way and she fell onto her back. The sky was clear, cool, and welcoming. The breeze was real, it was truly real, and it tickled past her locs as it prepared to usher in the early morning. The dark black sky was washed out unhurriedly by a deep sapphire with streaks of azure and vermilion creeping into it, and with it disappeared any star still in the night sky.

Oh, the sweet, sweet soil. She dug her overgrown nails into it, ripping into that crisp dirt, and poured it over her already ash-coated abdomen. The air smelt of smoke, yes, but a current brought fresher aromas to caress her sinuses. Now covered in tears on either cheek, the bodies of those that had run alongside her either laid out or standing above her, she drank in a life gained for another day. How beautiful was the absence of bullets, and how she had taken for granted the gift of hearing the earth's cocoon itself, its gusts and storms, uninterrupted by the generated beasts of mankind. She felt punches to the ground approach her, and leaned onto her side to face the footsteps, one set very large and one, small, that charged her.

"Mommy!" He fell at her side, wrapping his small arms around her grime-covered bosom as he laid his head directly at her heartbeat, cleaning the filth from her gown as he rubbed his face deeply into her skin. She began to weep.

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