

TO TOUCH THE STARS/TO TOUCH
THE EARTH

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In Partial Fulfillment
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in
English

by
Jennifer L. Smith

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Dedication

I would never have thought of doing a Master's Degree without my mother as an inspiration. She never met a book she didn't attempt to read, and she tackled her Master's with more grace than I could ever muster. Good or bad, she would have read every draft of this for me, and I'm just sorry she didn't get the chance to do so. This is for you, Mom.

This is also for my dad, even though he would have outright hated parts of it and probably been bored to tears by others. He would have read it anyway. He didn't get a chance to prove me wrong, so this is for you, too, Dad.

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ABSTRACT

TO TOUCH THE STARS/TO TOUCH THE EARTH

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Touch the Stars/Touch the Earth is a collection of four short stories that explore themes of grief, death, loss and agency through the medium of fiction, specifically using the genres of fabulist and science fiction. Each story has a central theme of loss and a regaining of agency. Each story uses genre to get at issues that are utterly mundane: the loss of a loved one, feeling stagnant, the process of being depressed and possibly suicidal, an unwanted pregnancy. Prefacing these stories is a discussion dwelling on the influences, theories, and popular culture that have helped shape the creative work, in particular the writing of Ursula K. Le Guin, English folk ballad Tam Lin, and numerous discussions that have taken place both online and in the real world regarding representation and how diversity is echoed or not echoed in popular fiction.

To Touch the Stars/To Touch the Earth

INTRODUCTION

Speculative fiction is an umbrella term that is entirely accurate to describe the fiction I present in this creative project, and entirely too broad to honestly describe it. This is in part why I've chosen to focus on my fiction by using terminology more commonly associated with genre fiction: science fiction and fantasy, though I might argue that the latter term is less accurate than "fabulist." These genres have often provided fertile ground for exploration of concepts such as death, grief, transformation, and choice—all of the things that are simple to say but can take years to fully understand and process. I've chosen to use these genres to explore some of these same concepts.

"What Remains" is a story about extinction, connecting the idea of a single death and the grief that comes with it to these large, almost incomprehensible events. Here the dead character was Sandra's husband, Solomon. There are small mentions throughout the story, such as: "the rough living made Sandra remember the camping trips Solomon had taken her on, as practice, he said" (Smith 26). Bringing him into the story with quiet scenes like that helped flesh out not only his character but also Sandra's, and it gave her grief more weight. Grief is something that only has substance when there's a certain amount of familiarity with the subject, and thus it's vital to know this about Solomon—that he liked to camp, that he was active, and that he did these things with his wife.

The World Without Us by Alan Weisman gave me a larger perspective when it comes to death and loss, in that it focuses on extinction, and specifically ponders the extinction of the human species. This intertwines with the idea, heavily prevalent in science fiction, of alien

intelligence and existence. Various hypotheses have been put forward regarding the existence, or lack thereof, of alien life and civilization; the possibility exists, of course, that if there is life on other planets (mathematically this is almost a certainty), and if that life is sapient, and if that life has created something humans might recognize as civilization, there is still the distinct chance that said alien civilization has already peaked and potentially gone extinct, along with the species that built it. I wanted to explore that idea, in part because humans have a need to be social, because it is a staple of the genre I'm writing in, and because it is fascinating in its own right. Sandra's hope of finding native Cytherans still living is both the curiosity of a scientist, and the hope of the bereaved for something to survive: "She didn't know if that hope was the hope of a scientist, wanting contact, wanting new discoveries of the complex astounding creativity of the universe, or if it was the hope of something living again, standing up against death and its all encompassing appetite" (27). Sandra has a place within the text as both the grieving widow and the analytic scientist. She encompasses both the emotional burden of loss as well as the geologic-scale of time and history that science demands.

Extinction is a word that is commonly seen in media, but the actual implications of what it means are sometimes a bit too large for the human mind to really grasp. It's a word that is longer than love or death or grief, which are all short words but extremely weighty concepts, but extinction can encompass those things when applied to certain subjects, such as our own species' potential (and, arguably, inevitable) end. The way I chose to explore this was through a single death, because often even that is difficult for people to grasp, but it is far easier to comprehend than an entire species going extinct--especially when that entire species is not human. Within "What Remains" we have Sandra's loss of Solomon, which is present from the very first page: "she couldn't bear the idea of touching his things again, not his shirts, gone cold with the

absence of him, nor the photographs, nor the things his hands had touched with fondness and reverence” (22).

I chose to focus on this idea of extinction juxtaposed with an individual’s death as a way of examining grief in the microcosm of a single loss. It’s difficult to grieve for the loss of a whole species, but easier to mourn the loss of an individual. Sandra feels both because of her profession, much the way archeologists might retrospectively mourn lost civilizations. “What was the difference between a species-wide extinction and the death of one tiny person?... Solomon’s smiles, slightly crooked because he was always a little self-conscious of his teeth, and the way he had tugged on her braids” (34). The sharp juxtaposition between an entire civilization and a single person, recently lost, helps Sandra channel both the immensity of what she and her team have discovered, and the implications of it, as well as transforming and processing some of her own grief for her late husband. This is specific when she has left the ruins, in order to process the discovery: “The loss washed over her, immense; for the moment, it washed her own grief into something wider, a sea instead of her own tiny pond” (33).

Like “What Remains,” one of the central themes of “Thanatos” is death, with the difference being that instead of centering on the bereaved, it focuses instead on the idea of a desire for death. With “Thanatos,” I had two images I knew I wanted somewhere in the story: the image of a medieval plague doctor, of that shadowy near-human figure with a mask like a bird, and the image of a necropolis. Not just a graveyard, but an actual city of the dead. “He dreamed of cities full of people, lying on their backs or curled on their sides, completely silent, peaceful, quiet in the sun and under the light of the stars. Sometimes they were wrapped in elaborate shrouds, sometimes they were in clear plastic casings, sometimes they were decorated with flowers” (54). In this respect I am indebted to Neil Gaiman and his graphic novels, specifically

The Sandman: World's End, because there's a section that heavily features a necropolis and builds on the idea of a city of the dead, which nurtured the idea of the thanatologists as caretakers for the dead.

I like the idea of playing around with human arrogance around evolution, particularly our own. I have Arthur's unnamed third wife dwell on it: "'We're at the apex of our evolution. We've mastered our biology. Why would anyone want to dwell on the failures? They don't deserve our attention'" (51). This touches on something I see prevalent in our modern culture, and that is the desire to avoid death whenever possible. This is most easily seen in any health-centered magazine that is produced for the layman, as many actual health professionals are much more accepting of death as a natural course. It is the magazines and the accompanying industry that promise to extend one's life if one only eats this superfood or has this specific exercise regime or sticks to this fad diet. It's all predicated on the idea of extending life and staving death off. There's always the possibility of using science to extend life. One of the reasons we age is that the telomeres on the ends of our chromosomes are basically programmed to shorten as we age. If they remained at a stable rate, or if they never shortened, hypothetically we could live much longer.

The downside of that, of course, is that it begs the question: what would we do with extended lifespans? The world I have set Arthur in is utopian, in the sense that there is no hunger, little conflict, and a culture of understanding that everyone needs to move on eventually. This story could easily have gone a different direction, considering humanity's history of hierarchy and inequality, but I needed to keep the story concise. The idea of biological or evolutionary "failures" is a loaded one, considering the history of eugenics in this country and the way the idea of "evolutionary failures" has been used to murder people. I didn't want to

delve too deeply into Arthur's world, as "Thanatos" is sharply focused on a single character, but I wanted the idea that this apparent utopia and scientific miracle wasn't all it is cracked up to be to be referenced, albeit obliquely.

Another influence in this regard is a recent social movement called "death positivity," outlined by the Order of the Good Death. This is a movement, headed by morticians and funeral home directors, who advocate for letting families take care of their dead loved ones at home or in whatever manner would best actually serve their grief, rather than the dead being bundled off behind closed doors and the family having no more contact with them. I came into contact with these ideas years after my parents died, and I have been left to wonder how much it might have helped me to deal with my grief if I'd been able to have more in the way of closure when it came to their bodies, rather than handing them over to a funeral home and getting back their ashes. This is where the idea of the thanatologist came from. They are one part undertaker, one part mortician, one part priest of the dead and dying. Arthur is dying in this story; he may be physically fine, but his inner world has grown small, and he has lived so long that nothing new under the suns will really bring him out of that shadow.

The central issue of Arthur's dilemma is that he's simply lived much longer than humans are supposed to live: "He had begun, many, many years ago, and now he had begun to wonder: when was he going to end" (Smith 52). The substance of this story is deeply entwined with not just a suicidal ideation, which is somewhat different, but a sense of tiredness and a desire for a natural end. Suicidal ideation, and the impetus towards suicide, are more often driven by strong emotions, such as hopelessness. While Arthur may be depressed, he is not hopeless in the sense of having no resources, or feeling that he is a burden. Rather, Arthur is thinking about the idea of a human life having a finite span, and that extending it greatly beyond its natural span may bring

on the desire for death, as death is a natural part of the life cycle. We can see the distinction when Arthur wonders about dying and the reality of being dead: “But would it be so bad, Arthur wondered, if one did just lay there and rot? Would it be restful?” (51). Arthur is not hoping for death as an end to misery outside of his control, but rather as a natural entropic end.

The last thing that is present in this story is an undercurrent of depression. This is inevitably informed by my own experiences with depression and related morbid feelings, and the way Arthur exists in this story is very much a depressed state of existence. The depressive aspect of this story was actually not intentional, as I was attempting to get at the idea that there is “an instinctual desire for death” (Merriam Webster)—the idea that there’s a drive for death that eventually kicks in, and it’s not necessarily a bad thing. I tried to illustrate that in this draft as much as possible—Arthur has done a great many things, had a great many relationships, and has lived in many places. His life has been full, and now he’s done with it.

Grief is a consistent theme in my work. It’s universal—humans grieve over loss of many different material and ephemeral things, and while I most often focus on the loss of a family member or friend, there are other forms of loss, as well: relationships that end, the end of a job, the loss of a home, the loss of self, the loss of autonomy. Loss is something I’ve become very familiar with over the last ten years, and it is something I tend to explore in my writing to a large degree, specifically the grief centered around loss of life and loss of place. “Thanatos” is the only story I’ve written to date that explicitly dwells on the idea of ending one’s own life; of course, the premise in that story is that humans have achieved immortality, and eventually one gets tired of living. Thanatos was the Greek personification of death, but in this story I’m using the term as it is used in Freudian psychoanalytic theory: the “death drive,” or an instinctual desire for death.

The idea of death being instinctual is an interesting and intriguing one, and I wanted to

put that in conflict with the prevailing thought, which is that life is better and must be preserved or extended at all costs. Joanna Russ is distinctly influential here; my introduction to her was her novel *We Who Are About To...* which explicitly puts a patriarchal, colonial group of people up against odds that they are, quite frankly, likely not going to beat. The novel's unnamed narrator explicitly pipes up and demands a logical reason why they should not all commit suicide before they die of disease, starvation, or dehydration, all of which are likely in the situation they find themselves in. I wanted to go a different direction with this idea—I wanted to look at the possibility that death may eventually be something that humans don't have to deal with anymore, and what that might look like. I feel it's a common theme in science fiction, because our society is in many ways terrified of death and revolts against it constantly.

Science fiction and fantasy are also, in many ways, genres of life. Science fiction can wax hopeful about the future; that humanity will have a future, even if it's only ever on this singular fantastic planet. Despite the apparent dichotomy of science fiction and fantasy, which both readily overlap with horror, both genres are about survival—about pushing past the despair and the dark. Sometimes it swallows us; more often, we emerge on the other side changed.

“Little Blue Dot” is about coping with loss and struggling to adjust to a new normal. Opal is a little girl who has lost a parent, and her only other family is her (not much) elder sister. I couldn't use the language of adult grief, and I couldn't have Opal acting as a grieving adult, because she isn't one. She is a child, and her reactions and observations needed to be those of a child, as much as possible. This is exemplified by Opal's fantasizing about Earth, which to her is a strange and wondrous place. Specifically, Opal sees Earth as a paradise where nothing bad ever happens: “On Earth, people didn't die from stupid things” (37). Mars is familiar and she is understandably not impressed with the familiar.

In the case of this story, it was getting Opal to a point of realizing both that the place she wanted to be was not as immediately interesting as her own planet: “Far in front of them the forest sighed in the wind. The stars gleamed, arced over them. Opal felt light, light, light” (47) and that the fantasy was just that: “On Earth, people still die” (45). The reality of Mars is needed to ground Opal. This is emphasized by the fact that Mars is a hostile environment; the atmosphere is thin and carbon-dioxide heavy, the gravity is lesser, and Opal has spent all her life in the domes of the colony. Mars is not special to her because to her it is familiar, but also because Mars has introduced her to the fact of loss—the loss of their father, who has, it is implied, been killed in an accident.

This story is also about class—Amber specifically mentions being poor, and the mention of RP (received pronunciation) is deliberate, as it’s a marker of British class distinctions. British RP is the sort of pronunciation that one sees in news anchors and public speakers, and it can be used specifically in acting to differentiate class and region. When Amber is speaking “posh,” as Opal calls it, she’s trying to hide her lower-class accent—which ties into the idea that Earth is a fantasy and Mars is reality, in that Earth is envisioned by Opal as a perfect paradise, when it cannot possibly be so, given the issues present on Mars. The girls are not white. I specifically see them as having African heritage, explicitly stated in an exchange between Amber and Opal regarding Amber’s use of a different accent. Opal does not believe there’s discrimination; her sister is older and knows better. “Poor black people,” Amber said. “They always have something in their back pockets to trip up poor black people” (41). The world of “Little Blue Dot”—unlike, perhaps, the worlds of “What Remains” or “Thanatos”—is much closer to our own in terms of prejudices that linger.

Amber and Opal have lost their father, and are struggling to go on without him. Amber has adjusted by trying to better both herself and her situation as Opal's guardian, by working and attending school, and incorporating some of his things into her own wardrobe. Opal prefers escapism, fantasizing about an Earth that doesn't exist, because to do otherwise is to confront the fact of her father's absence: "...the thought of it anymore came with the thoughts of her father, the way he had put her up on his shoulders...She detested crying, and that's all the memories seemed to make her do, just dissolve into a messy flood of tears" (46). Opal wants, in many respects, control of herself and her situation, and she does it through fantasy.

"Miracle City" is a story about loss of agency, and the struggle to regain that agency. I began it with a simple idea, blasphemous though many might find it—the idea that immaculate conception, or rather, the conception of a child between a god and a mortal human woman, without any consent, is essentially an unwanted pregnancy. My thought process was wondering how the Virgin Mary might have felt, and if she was consenting. The Bible isn't focused on her agency; it's sort of accepted that she was happy with the pregnancy. Understandably, this idea can come across as somewhat blasphemous. It is, by its very nature, a thorny idea, and I wanted to approach it fully from the would-be mother's perspective. In truth I strayed from the idea of divinity being unwelcome and into the more concrete and messy fear that comes with unwanted pregnancy, illustrated throughout the story in terms of body horror: "In only a week [her stomach] had expanded, pushed out, swelled like some sort of mushroom beneath her skin" (64). The pregnancy is an invasion, a violation, rather than a joyous event.

The central relationship of the story is the sibling bond between Andrea and Phoebe. Andrea is acerbic but ultimately a supportive and loving sister, even if she is bad about showing it, but her occasionally unsympathetic commentary was essential to the story—it would have

been easy for Phoebe to drown in a morass of self-pity or paralysis, and Andrea is the character that prods her into making a decision and following through with it. “‘Ah, there’s the hysterics, right on cue,’ Andrea said” (60). Andrea is an asset to Phoebe, assisting her in reclaiming the agency that has been taken away by helping her find a solution to her sister’s dilemma.

The whole critique I’m attempting to make with this story is the idea that the impregnated subject of the immaculate conception is ultimately denied agency, because the father is a god and has much more power than she does. This is reflected in the social response to Phoebe’s pregnancy: her supervisor assumes she’ll keep it, a coworker suggests a demi-god play group, and despite abortion being an option, all of the clinics seem reluctant or unable to help her. “‘She’d had enough of the darting looks and thoughtful hums and we’re so sorry’s” (65). One of Phoebe’s uphill struggles is the fact that no abortion clinic will help her—her pregnancy is divine in origin, and thus she finds her options severely curtailed.

The entire story is about Phoebe struggling to find agency in a world that seems determined to take it away from her. Her decision to search for herbs to act as abortifacants is a rash but necessary choice; they were a traditional way of dealing with unwanted pregnancies well before the invention of pills and abortion clinics. I was influenced fairly strongly by the folk ballad “Tam Lin” in that respect. In a modern version the heroine, Janet, having gotten pregnant by a knight trapped by the fairies (and thus facing serious social fallout if she has a child out of wedlock) decides to go looking for a solution. Anais Mitchell and Jefferson Hamer’s rendition of the ballad places the exigency and agency firmly with Janet and the question of her situation and her potentially unwanted pregnancy:

‘Oh I will pull the rose, Tam Lin

I will break the tree

but I'll not bear the little babe
that you have got with me.
If he were too a gentleman
not a wild shade
I'd rock him all the winters' night
and all the summers' day' (Mitchell and Hamer).

It was this specific rendition that made me think of Phoebe finding her own solution, especially if no clinic could help her. For context, most popular renditions of this ballad place the exigency on the fact that Tam Lin's life is in danger, because he was kidnapped by the fairies and fears being used as a tithe to Hell (a rendition that does this is Fairport Convention's, on their album *Liege and Lief*). This particular ballad is one I've engaged with before for academic purposes, but here I decided to use the shifting of agency and exigency to Janet as a model for what to do with Phoebe—she had to be the one confronting these issues and making these hard decisions, because whichever god impregnated her was not going to help and her sister simply could not make the hard choices for her. This is, ultimately, why I decided against pulling more fabulist elements into the forefront of the story—there's already quite a lot there between the immaculate conception and the accelerated body-horror pregnancy, and the story itself is not really about those things, but about how a human woman reacts to them and takes her autonomy back from these forces that are trying to keep it out of her hands: “She took a deep breath, and hoped the hill was a steep as she remembered, and leapt forward, the pendulum swinging at the farthest edge of its arc. When she hit the ground, she had the sweet taste of her own choice in her mouth” (70). Ultimately the story had to end with Phoebe embracing the agency she had and making what choice she could, whatever the consequences.

The aesthetics of speculative fiction, particularly as they relate to science fiction and fantasy, come into conflict with both traditional methods of reading literature and the mainstream perception of the genres. Russ, in her article in *Science Fiction Studies*, “Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction,” argues that science fiction cannot be critiqued like other literature; it is, like medieval literature, didactic in nature and thus cannot conform easily to the critiques used on other forms and genres of literature. In part of her article she mentions the use of what is colloquially called “cardboard characters”—though the term she uses is “Everyman.” The point of science fiction for Russ is the ideas being conveyed, rather than the characters that play out those ideas, of phenomena over character: “That science fiction’s emphasis is always on phenomena—to the point where reviewers and critics can commonly use such phrases as ‘the idea as hero.’” While I can appreciate this approach for select texts of speculative fiction, I cannot paint the whole of the genre as requiring a disregard of character, and especially not my own work. Fairness must be given to Russ, who wrote about this didactic reading of science fiction in 1975, when the genre was heavily influenced by writers such as Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, authors who focused strongly on scientific principles and didactic storytelling over complex characterization and motivation. Ironically, Russ wrote at least one character-driven, character-centric feminist science fiction novel, *We Who Are About To...*, in which the narration is first-person and the protagonist a fully realized character.

Although I do appreciate the scientific values and philosophical ideas inherent in speculative fiction, it is rare that I can, as a writer or a reader, forgive the lack of character that might be neglected in order to serve a didactic purpose. In my own writing the tension between phenomena and character has been present, because I often have an idea or a didactic goal before

I have a character. “Miracle City” embodies this, between the ambivalence over an unwanted pregnancy conflicting with female agency and an individual character’s response to such a situation. Benjamin Percy in *Thrill Me: Essays on Fiction*, writes that this focus on ideas over character (and the realism that character can bring to otherwise fantastical stories) may be one reason that genre fiction is avoided at the teaching level (Percy 69). Beginning writers are often more interested in the phenomena than on the consequences of that phenomena on the characters, which creates a disconnect for the reader. Empathizing with the character is part of what allows the reader to engage with the story being told. “Imagine the emotional arc of your character laid upon the narrative arc of the story. To create suspense, you must have both: what is outside of the character (whatever is intruding on her life) and inside of the character (whatever she desires that is just out of her reach)” (21). “Miracle City” is a story in which the tension between the didactic idea/phenomena and the character serve to create this sense of suspense. In order to convey the idea, one must do it through character; pure exposition will not suffice. This does not mean the character has to be human; it may be alien, animal, city, plant or planet, if it is done well enough. But unless other storytelling elements are present, such as the inherent drama of a character’s conflicting choices, the didactic idea runs the risk of becoming a lecture, rather than an element of a story.

My own experience as a writer is that lack of characterization weakens a story, regardless of genre or form. Building an identifiable character is essential if one wishes to engage with the reader, and while certain forms of science fiction may be better read critically if one takes Russ’s didactic text approach, I don’t feel this can be applied to every text that calls itself science fiction, or speculative fiction. Modern speculative fiction, and I include Russ’s writings in this, are often much more character driven. “Miracle City” was in some respects exactly this

problem—my initial idea was in many ways didactic, but I couldn't tell the story with a cardboard Everywoman character. Phoebe is a sister, a gardener, an ordinary woman uncomfortable with the social expectations around her pregnancy. "...[B]ut each time she felt herself swinging back to that dark, uncertain, angry place. She felt as if there were no solid place to stand, just shifting ground that threatened to unbalance her whichever way she turned" (Smith 62). Phoebe's discomfort and fear are the driving agents of the story. The tension between the phenomena (divine conception without the mother's permission) and the character (Phoebe's reactions to it) are the central aspect of the story, and would be much less interesting if Phoebe was a flat character that the reader cannot relate to.

I've come to a point where character is central to the story I'm trying to tell, secondary even to the idea of the story. The ideas I have are interesting and the questions that can be asked with speculative and fabulist fiction are the sort that simply cannot be asked within the bounds of realism, but I find it takes an equal or greater commitment to character. I'm a reader as well as a writer, and if I cannot connect with a character, even a dislikable one, then I will be much less invested in the story that the author is trying to tell. This applies particularly if the author in question is me.

Historically science fiction and fantasy have, as genres, been very, very white. This is in part because, in the West, the most well-known authors of the genre have been white men, and they largely wrote about white male characters. At least one highly influential work of the fantasy genre was based around western European languages and geography, and had no characters of color. It has gone on to inspire a whole market of imitators, many of whom would argue that there were no people of color in the Middle Ages, and thus they don't need to include

people of color in their vaguely western European fantasy land. Much of science fiction's most influential decades were grounded in the idea of American white men exploring space, mirroring and expanding on the possibilities of the time. This had the side effect of leaving anyone who was not white or male rather lacking in representation.

Ursula K. Le Guin wrote science fiction and fantasy, and I was introduced to her books with *A Wizard of Earthsea*. The central story was man vs. self, and between the centrality of that conflict and the skillfulness of her writing, I overlooked, at fourteen, one of the other things that she imparted with that book: that the characters in something speculative do not have to be white. This is something deeply tied to the contemporary literary landscape that I find myself navigating, as in the last few years a number of conversations have arisen regarding representation and diversity within publishing, and particularly within the genres of science fiction and fantasy. Le Guin was not explicitly feminist for a very long time, and many of her earlier works reflect that fact, but one thing she was always well aware of was the fact that her protagonists did not have to be white—and indeed, in *A Wizard of Earthsea* and many of her Hainish novels which are set in the same universe, of which *The Left Hand of Darkness* is one, many if not most of her characters are not white; they are brown skinned, or Black, or Asian. This is present in her novels and in her short stories. I feel there is a certain echo in my ideas, particularly regarding diversity and hierarchical structures.

Joanna Russ and Octavia E. Butler are much more recent influences—I only encountered them in the last few years, but where Le Guin was delicately feminist, Russ was explicitly so, and where Le Guin was subtly centering characters of color, Butler took that particular issue and pulled it center stage and examined it in detail, while working the feminist angle in as many different directions as needed. These play out in my work—in “Little Blue Dot” the sisters are

characters of color, though I don't dwell too strongly on that aspect. In "What Remains" Sandra is also a character of color, as is Junichi (though he is very much a secondary character) and Sandra's dead husband, Solomon.

This is likely not apparent to anyone who does not read much science fiction, but most of my influences are authors of what is sometimes called "social" science fiction. This is the science fiction that is less interested in gadgets (though scientific theories might be used in the story) or in straight-forward adventure. My female characters are usually not the wife/mother/daughter, unless they happen to have family; one is a xenoarcheologist, another a thanatologist, and two pairs of sisters. I have chosen to make several characters non-white, and in the case of "Little Blue Dot" they are implied to be lower-class. More importantly I try to center female characters as characters with agency, even if that agency is in some respects sharply curtailed, and I try to portray a wider range of female experience than just wife/mother/love interest. Those roles can be important, but I'm more interested in working outside of them.

It was important to me to include characters of color in my work for a number of reasons—first and foremost, humanity is not a single color, and as someone who reads widely in these genres I find it aggravating to constantly read something that can be blindingly monochrome. Once the elephant was pointed out—that so many of our protagonists in these stories (in all stories that are prominent in the West) are often white and male, it became very obvious to me that it's irresponsible and plain unfair to expect that only authors of color should be writing characters of color. I hold a privileged position in this society, and while I may get details wrong I feel it's still important for white writers to do some centralizing of narratives that are not inherently their own. If I were a realist writer, I'd feel deeply constrained by needing to make my characters accurate portrayals of people in a certain time and place; with science fiction

I can set the story hundreds of years in the future, and while racism may still be present (“Little Blue Dot” makes a very tiny nod in this direction), I can create the culture and I have to worry less about making sure something is accurate to a time and place that my readers may intimately know, and instead focus on something universal, such as a longing for things to be different, or grief over the loss of a loved one. Of course, this undoubtedly brings up other considerations—I don’t know that, just because my characters are not white, they necessarily work as good representations of diversity.

Le Guin brought diversity to the table, and Russ brought a distinctly feminist position. Butler brought the intersection of feminism and diversity, in the intersectionality of her characters, who are often African-American women. Although both Le Guin and Russ wrote feminist themes, they did not always approach them with the intersection of two issues the way Butler did. This makes sense if one considers that Le Guin and Russ did have white privilege to depend on, which Butler did not, and thus Butler was able to see intersections that Le Guin and Russ—speaking only of their works mentioned here—did not. Butler wrote within these intersections of being, years before Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw articulated and introduced the concept of intersectionality as a tool in discourses around various oppressions.

Butler’s particular focus on female agency was a marked influence on “Miracle City,” as her character Lilith, from her novel *Dawn*, is given little choice regarding her own body, future, and reproductive choices by an alien species. Lilith’s choices are all narrow ones; she takes her agency where she can, but she is aware that the choices she has are all limited, and all have a bitter taste. “She considered resisting, making it drug her and carry her back. But that seemed a pointless gesture” (Butler 243-44). This quote is towards the end of the novel, when Lilith

acknowledges that the choices she has made have made her, to many of the other humans in the novel, an object of fear and hatred; her future now lies solely with the alien.

Which leads me into a rather large influence for me, or rather, the influence of a specific conversation, that has continued to have an impact on modern science fiction and fantasy writers and readers. This was a dialogue that has been dubbed “RaceFail ’09,” a many-month long conversation about race in science fiction and fantasy works, particularly works that are currently being written. The conversation arose on LiveJournal in 2009, after novelist Elizabeth Bear made a post (as a white author) about writing “the Other.” Many people who read her blog, including many, many fans of color, took issue with how certain things were being discussed, and many white authors and fans joined in, and the result was a conversation that is, in some respects, still ongoing. I have never read Elizabeth Bear, but I remembered posts and conversations that brought up these conversations. There were a lot; as N. K. Jemisin puts it, “It involved several thousand participants and spawned several hundred essays — and it hasn’t really ended yet, just slowed down” (Jemisin, “Why I Think RaceFail Was the Bestest Thing Ever for SFF”). The “fail” part of the title came from the fact that many of the white participants, most notably authors such as Bear, often did not seem to understand how their depiction—or lack thereof—of people of color could be problematic. Jemisin even remarks in that same essay that the “fail” of RaceFail ’09 was perceived by “a lot of white people — seem to think the ‘fail’ part of RaceFail lay in the fact that it occurred at all. It was too angry for anything productive to happen, they say; there’s a time and a place for such conversations but not now; there’s a way to have such conversations but not this” (Jemisin).

What RaceFail highlighted was that many white authors, and many white readers, did not necessarily see the lack of people of color in speculative fiction as a problem that needed

addressing with any sort of urgency. People of color, some of them writers and many of them readers, strongly disagreed. As N. K. Jemisin says in another essay, "Why did I have to travel to the margins of speculative fiction to see anything of myself? Why was it easier to find aliens or unicorns than people of color or realistic women? (Jemisin, "How Long 'Til Black Future Month?")."

That question resonates with me, though the resonance did not begin with N. K. Jemisin. The knowledge that I, as a writer, would have readers of many colors, and that some of them did not just want, but honestly needed to see themselves represented, began much earlier—exemplified by an essay from Pam Noles, who wrote about what it was like to be a Black girl interested in fantasy and science fiction, at a time when almost none of the material she read or saw reflected her reality back at her (Noles, "Shame"). "A kid can feel the loss from something taken away, even if they don't have the words to say exactly what it is or define the nature of this new pain" (Noles). Those were stories I had heard before, but with Noles' essay a new dimension unfolded for me—the realization that, if I stepped into the shoes of a writer, I needed to remember that not all of my readers would look like me.

Conversations such as RaceFail '09 have had an impact on the landscape of genre fiction, specifically science fiction and fantasy fiction. More authors are publishing who are people of color, writers such as N.K. Jemisin are not shy about mentioning the importance of diversity in fiction, and their peers are listening. *Lightspeed Magazine*, among other magazines of anthologized genre fiction, has published a series of special issues parodying the idea that diversity "destroys" the genre: "Women Destroy Science Fiction!", "Queers Destroy Science Fiction!" and "People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction!"

There have been other signs that the landscape—inherently political in the way art can be—is shifting and looking for a new place to settle; in recent years there have been several flurries around “PuppyGate,” wherein authors of a more conservative bent in the field protested the idea that the Hugo and Nebula Awards were being increasingly awarded to women, people of color, and people of a spectrum of sexualities for writing novels and short stories that were more than just straightforward adventurous science and fantasy fiction. The “Puppies”, so named by one of the leaders of the movement, gamed the system at the Hugo Awards for two years running, and forced the slate to feature nothing but authors of either very conservative fiction and a deeply conservative bent, or authors of fiction that was not “message fiction.” The people who could vote made their voice heard: for 2015 and 2016, a record number of “No Awards” were given out, and many of the people nominated by the “Puppies” for the purposes of a political statement made their views public. Many of them withdrew, and those who could not asked that their works not be voted for. Amy Wallace, writing for *Wired*, explained all of this and more in her article “Who Won Science Fiction’s Hugo Awards, And Why It Matters.” These conversations and repercussions are still echoing in the last few years. PuppyGate has pulled some rather ugly threads of our society to the surface in this narrow subcultural space, specifically racism (the leader of the “Rabid Puppies” is a well-verified racist) and sexism. The response to these reactionary events has been hopeful, though; more often, and in more places, conversations are being held in regards to the importance of representation in media of all kinds, not just on the internet or among only marginalized communities.

Within the contemporary landscape of speculative literature, I would hope my work could be seen to follow in the traditions of those authors I’ve named here already—Le Guin,

Butler, and Russ. In terms of the stories in this collection I would say that they fall squarely in the tradition of feminist writing, particularly the tradition of feminist science fiction or feminist fantasy, which is a much smaller tradition but nonetheless one that is still present.

In her 2014 acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation’s Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, Le Guin said, “Hard times are coming, when we’ll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We’ll need writers who can remember freedom — poets, visionaries — realists of a larger reality.” In many ways this reflects how I feel and how I see speculative fiction as a genre—realism is a solid base to begin from, but one need not feel confined by its restraints. The imagination is not bound by the laws of physics.

Though I don’t see myself making much of a mark, that does not mean that there is no point to contributing. Our society likes to make much of “marks,” but the truth as I see it is that ideas are best sold by several sources—though I have mentioned Ursula K. Le Guin as an important influence, the fact of the matter is that I have read at least three hack authors for every good one, and that’s all right. Even the hack authors get a good idea and convey said idea well every now and again, and if one reads widely then the impact of these ideas becomes multiplied. I expect my writing, once I begin the process of submitting and publishing it, will be like a raindrop—one may be noticeable on its own, but otherwise quickly forgotten, whereas in a downpour one is not likely to feel every drop but the overall idea is certainly gotten across.

WHAT REMAINS

The closet was a small thing, packed with box upon box, secured with the sort of extra-strong packing tape used on space stations. There was no room left for her clothes, no room for anything of hers; just boxes, cardboard, stuffed full of clothing and knickknacks and pictures, the physical memories. Sandra stuffed one last box on top.

She wasn't sure if she could bear to touch them. The last hospital visit had not been devastating, wrenching, or earth-shattering; all that had come weeks ago, with the news of the accident. The last visit was simply numbness, and she had used that numbness to pack up his things, stuff them into boxes and tape them up—artifacts for some other archeologist to excavate. It was decided—she couldn't bear the idea of touching his things again, not his shirts, gone cold with the absence of him, nor the photographs, nor the things his hands had touched with fondness and reverence. The thought of touching them made her stomach hot and her throat tight. Her eyes were sore from weeping. They were only things. They would wait.

“Great news!” Meredith trilled. “They've found a proper site on Cythera's southern continent, one of those arid coastal areas. Sort of like the Mediterranean, but without all the olive trees. And the university can't say we're just dreamers now.”

It didn't feel proper to smile, not just yet, but one began to stretch her mouth, and a thrill worked its way up her spine. Sandra had been waiting, waiting, waiting for this. Of course it would come now, while she was sitting at her little breakfast table, sipping coffee and trying to ignore the overwhelming silence of her kitchen. “How did they find it? Satellite or radar or what?”

“Some farmer stumbled across it,” Meredith said. There was rustling on her side of the phone. “Resentful as all hell about it, too, when we told her we’d be taking up the site. We're getting together as many of our students as we can. Are you interested, or not, Dr. Kwan, because I really don't want to have to ask that cow Dawson over in New Varosha, but I will if you don't want to come.”

“Meredith, we're some of the only xenoarcheologists in existence,” Sandra said. “How could I not want to come? Of course. I'll start packing immediately.”

“I'm sending Junichi to share your cab to the airport,” Meredith said. Her voice sounded a million miles away, planning a dozen details at once. “He’s the only student so far who volunteered. The plane leaves tomorrow afternoon, and even that is running *intolerably* late, but if you can be ready?”

“I can be ready by tonight,” Sandra said. “I haven't exactly been a social butterfly, lately. I've nothing on.”

There was a long moment of quiet. “I had forgotten,” Meredith said. “Sandra—are you sure you want to come? I know it must have been rather—I mean....”

Sandra pursed her lips, bit them between her teeth. Stumbling apologies and feather-down condolences were a normal part of her day now. “I think a viable site is something worthwhile, don't you? The timing isn't what I'd like, but it never is, so no point complaining.”

“If you're sure,” Meredith said, but she sounded as though she was already thinking along three different tracks.

“I am. Do not call New Varosha.”

“Ugh, not if I can help it,” Meredith said, and rang off. Sandra stirred her coffee and looked out the window, contemplated the way the sky had just a touch of green. The

atmospheric conditions were not identical to Earth, but that had been expected. Sandra didn't particularly care; she had never seen a purely blue sky, and likely never would; and Cythera was a planet that had its own charms to recommend it. For one thing, no one would be prodding her to move somewhere smaller, now that it was just her in this house; no one would be pointing out that she didn't really need that much space, did she? Cythera was not overpopulated, resource-strangled Earth, after all. Sandra found herself just as glad. She finished her coffee and got up to pack.

The sun was high and hot when Sandra got her first look at the dig site.

The southern continent was one of three, but their destination was on the largest and most biologically diverse. The site was indeed not far from the coast, situated on a series of terraced bluffs, and the surroundings were not unlike the Mediterranean, which Sandra had only ever read about. It was that reading, and the photographs of the wealth of ruins, that had encouraged her love of the past.

They had slept overnight in a rough pre-fab hostel, then trekked out to the site.

It did not look like much. There was a small, low wall, made of cut stones fitted together; it rose perhaps two feet from the ground, and ran about twenty from east to west. That was all, just a wall. But Sandra could feel that excitement again; according to the Fermi Paradox, the Rare Earth hypothesis, and half a dozen other competing theories, there shouldn't even be a wall here, not on Cythera, a planet sixty-eight light years from Earth and only recently colonized. There should be flora, and perhaps even fauna, but rarely if ever anything of significant intelligence.

“Well, it doesn't look like much,” Junichi Sato said, uncertainly. “I don't suppose it could have been constructed by something that wasn't quite human-level sentient?”

“That's a possibility,” Sandra said, “but I doubt it. Remember, on Earth there were no structures like this that were not created by *Homo sapiens* or some other hominid. And there's not much evidence for that second one.” She knelt and peered closely at the stones. Samples would have to be taken, but she was sure they had been fitted together with mortar. “But Cythera is not Earth, and we, my friends, are in uncharted waters.”

Meredith stepped up next to her, fanning herself with an old-fashioned hat. “Here there be dragons, then. What fun!”

“Oh yes,” Sandra said. She gently touched the wall, felt the dust and rough texture of the stones, rubbed the grit between her fingers. “Oh, certainly.”

They set up camp not too far from the wall, and began unpacking the equipment. Machines to sense any potential ruins buried under the earth, portable sensors, and of course the old standby—hand tools to carefully dig, sample, and bag any specimens for analysis at the labs back in the pair of colonial cities, on the northern continent. Digging—whether for human remains, fossils, or even the unlikely possibility of alien ruins, all of it required care that robotics simply could not manage.

“Should we put out a watch for looters?” Meredith asked, as they began to settle down for the night. “They were a terrible nuisance on Earth, would they be a problem here, too?”

“I'm still awake,” Sandra said. “Though I doubt we'll have much to worry about right now.”

Sandra spent the evening staring at the ruins, under the cover of attempting to write in her journal. It was an old fashioned thing, with a stylus and screen, but she rather liked it; it allowed

her to think. She watched the small nubby wall fall into greater and greater shadow, and thought about what—or who—might have built it. Who they were, and where they might have gone.

The week stretched, sticky and warm and sweet and uncomfortable, like syrup or sap spread over her fingers. The dig was miles away from the nearest settlement, and they were so few that Meredith didn't like the idea of leaving for the night; so they camped. Junichi was uncomfortable with it, disgruntled and prone to being sarcastic in the mornings, but otherwise he bore up with a quiet stoicism; the rough living made Sandra remember the camping trips Solomon had taken her on, as practice, he said.

“You won't have indoor plumbing when you find a site,” he'd said. He had tugged on her braids, twined them around his fingers. “We can camp often, get you used to it.”

When Sandra tucked herself into a corner of the wall at the end of the week, her journal in hand, it was with the knowledge that the wall she leaned against once belonged to a small city—they had managed to discover that much—and the heart-squeezing knowledge that the city Solomon had always believed she would find was actually here, and he was not; she couldn't tell him about it, she couldn't phone him the way Junichi could phone his sister, she couldn't watch his face change and light up with joy and pride and that miserable hint of smugness he always had in his eyes when he knew he was right about something.

A week's worth of surveying and scanning had yielded up as many mysteries as answers. Scans of the ground of the site indicated specific scatterings of stones, arranged in semi-circles or nearly whole circles or thick bands that made Sandra think of curving city streets. Beneath the city was a hint of something large and cavernous, just a few meters under the soil and rock. There was only so much speculation that she could entertain, but it was clear that something

intelligent had once cut the stones, and mortared the walls, and made their dwellings—or their shops, or their cathedrals, or their sprawling multi-story malls—on the bluffs, looking out over the ocean.

The ruins had been built by something intelligent, and whatever it was had abandoned its creation, possibly by dying out. Cythera had been colonized in her grandmother's day; surely, surely, if there had been sentient inhabitants, they would have been noticed by now? But these ruins had been here for several thousand years—Meredith said at least three, perhaps four—and it was only now that they had been discovered. Cythera was still, in many ways, a complete mystery to its colonists; many of the land masses sported enormous forests, some temperate, some rainforest, and even some that appeared to be mostly fungal—fruiting bodies that shot up thirty feet and spread caps that were nearly half that in wide, spore-spouting fans. Who knew what lived in those treasure houses? In the Amazon, there had been tribes that had been uncontacted long after the rest of the world had become globalized. Perhaps native Cytherans lurked in the forests, watching.

Solomon would have laughed at her for that fanciful idea. Sandra watched the twilight falling, the greenish-blue shading to blue-violet-black, and closed her eyes. She didn't think that was likely, but it was at least a remote possibility, surely? She didn't know if that hope was the hope of a scientist, wanting contact, wanting new discoveries of the complex astounding creativity of the universe, or if it was the hope of something living again, standing up against death and its all encompassing appetite.

The wind through the stones sounded, briefly, like a laugh.

They struck solid gold only a day later. The possible cavern had turned out to be a hall of some sort; they had carefully, carefully dug until there was a hole large enough to send a camera through. Sandra watched the monitors, jittery with excitement. It raced up and down her nerves until she could barely contain the shaking. Junichi was lowering the camera with its portable light, though he was not much more contained than she was, and Meredith was not allowed near the equipment, since her hands were shaking so much her coffee fell like dirty rain onto her shoes.

The image on the monitors was not ideal—a little fuzzy, a little grainy, but still visible as a dusty wall, covered with what looked like varying colors. It could be mold—the cavern, when they had first broken through, had been cool and ever so slightly damp—but it also could have been paint; there was no way to tell unless the camera got closer. “Zoom in,” Sandra said, once, twice; but the light, even from the sun overhead, was not good enough.

“We’ll have to enlarge the hole and send someone down,” Meredith said, her voice shaking, as Junichi drew the camera back up. “That’s the only way we’ll know if we’re dealing with something worthwhile, or just a natural formation. Either way, the geologist will be happy.” She nudged Sandra, giddy, giggling, trembling.

“I wouldn’t recommend going down without a mask,” Junichi said. “Molds and fungi are particularly virulent when you get them in the lungs.” He himself had worn a simple half-mask when lowering the camera. Sandra could tell that he was smiling beneath it.

“I’ll do it,” Sandra said. “I don’t mind wearing a mask.”

Meredith made an annoyed noise. “No help for it, I suppose. Go on, then, suit up and let us see if this is a waste of time or not.”

Sandra had tied up her dozens of black braids, suited up in something that was not unlike a hazmat suit, donned a respiratory mask that was best for filtering out even the most microscopic of spores, and done everything short of ingesting sedatives to calm her shaking. This was the moment—beyond the wall, beyond the scans, this was the accumulation of visible, solid evidence. The fear that she might ruin it somehow, through clumsy human shaking, settled into her belly like a cold stone. She had waited while the hole was slowly enlarged, and had forced herself to patiently wriggle through, holding onto her anchoring rope. The cavern was dark, and the transition from shaded near-sun to near utter darkness made her blind. She flicked on her headlamp and looked around.

The light and dark splotches were paintings—murals, frescoes perhaps, the pigments still bright and sharp on the stone. It was not as damp as she had feared, and while there were spots of mold on the walls, it was not nearly as terrible as it could have been. The murals were nearly abstract to her eyes, and it took her a few easy swings to realize that the murals were only part of the equation—that a great many of the walls had markings on them, distinct and repetitious markings. Was this writing? Was this real, alien writing?

She closed her eyes, dizzy—not from swinging on the line, but from the possibility. Her heart was loud in her ears, and she felt it stuttering in her chest. This was not just a stone wall, not just something that might be a city. This was civilization, this was culture, this was *writing*. This was sentience painted on fresh plaster, thousands of years gone; this was a light coming on in the dark, a hand held when the night had been bad and loneliness had felt inevitable. Her heart thrummed painfully in her chest, and her stomach churned with acid. Was that possible, to be so thrilled it made one sick? She didn't know.

She snapped pictures slowly, holding herself carefully, doing her best to stay as still as possible. The marks were woven into spirals and gentle symbols of infinity—some shapes, then, were not unique to humans. She photographed and aimed her light as best she could, trying to keep her hands from shaking. That would ruin the photographs. Her mind was divided—the photographs, and the wonder of the marks. They could be a language—could be a religious hymn, a philosophical treatise, a scientific argument, a grocery list—or they might just be some form of decoration. There would be no Rosetta stone to help crack the mystery, nothing to unravel the knots of cuneiform or unlock the hieroglyphics. She traced one oft-repeated figure with her eyes. Could mean anything—life, death, beauty, laundry, slobbish, desk lamp, toothpaste. Had they even had teeth? Did beauty mean anything to them? Had they been color-blind, or like the mantis shrimp, seeing colors no human could ever dream of?

Had they had reverence for life? Did they bury their dead with kindness?

She signaled the team to pull her up, to present her findings. Meredith was already downloading the photographs when Sandra had at last peeled herself out of the suit.

“Proof,” Meredith was saying, reverently. “Absolute proof.” She huffed a laugh. “Doesn't that just figure? The first alien intelligence that mankind encounters, and they're all dead and gone. That's what I call inconsiderate.”

“They might still be around,” Junichi said. He was devouring the photographs with a subdued sort of excitement. “They might have found another ecological niche, or evolved to a different environment, or any number of other things. This is just one city. They might have covered the planet.” He was nearly vibrating in place. His hands were shaking as he pulled out his phone. “I'm texting Hanako. If that's okay. Is it okay?”

“Fine,” Meredith said, her eyes still on the photographs. She reached out and traced a figure with one finger.

“Or,” Sandra said, knowing as she did so that she was popping the fantastic bubble, “they might have only evolved on this continent, and died out—disease, war, environmental disaster. There's been no trace of them, outside of this city. Chances are very good that they're extinct.”

Junichi nodded, his thumbs flying. Meredith's mouth twisted into a moue of distaste.

“Like I said,” she grouched. “Inconsiderate.” She ran a hand through her short blond hair and sighed. “Well,” she said. “This is a fantastic find, and the university can't say we're all mad now, not with this proof. Downside is, now we'll certainly have looters.” She nodded at the hired farmers dotting the edges of the camp. “That lot won't keep quiet about this, you can almost bet. And even out here, there's plenty in the cities with more money than sense. Who cares if it destroys evidence of an alien culture? They have a genuine artifact, that's all that counts.”

“You're cynical all of a sudden,” Junichi said, but Sandra tuned them out, looking over the pictures one more time. The mural, as the photographs revealed, was most certainly a fresco. The colors were vivid in the light of her headlamp—blues, greens, sharp yellows, strong oranges and reds, indigoes and violets that were nearly jewel-like, though perhaps that was the light shining off some moisture. But there were figures in the mural—not just abstractions, though some of them could certainly be that, but figures that looked bipedal, in robes and headdresses, with animals and plants that were not completely unfamiliar. Sandra recognized a number of them from the local documents on fauna. The features of the bipedal figures were not easy to

discern; perhaps that was just her human perspective, perhaps that was some sort of quirk of the culture.

Her head swam, and she had to sit down. Culture, a real culture. It had only become real to her now, only become concrete with the discovery of art, maybe writing. Whoever these creatures, these people, had been, they had had culture. She and her team might find graves, or more cities. Evidence of agriculture, perhaps, or evidence of war. Statuary? Sculpture? Coins? Metallurgy? Perhaps not all of that, but the natives of this place had once lived here and been intelligent enough to create a city, to decorate it.

Solomon would have loved this, would have hung onto his phone, waiting eagerly for any update she could send him. Behind her she could hear the pinging of Junichi's phone, the special, musical ping that said his sister was responding to a text. Grief swelled in her throat, forcing itself forward. She stood up, slowly, and mumbled an excuse. Meredith nodded, distracted; Junichi gave her a slightly longer look, and turned away, his thumbs tapping.

Sandra felt as though she were drowning. Her greatest hope, and her greatest fear—that they would find something, only to have it be the last bones of some other species—the last of a thinking, feeling race of beings, who might have looked into the mirror of humanity and perhaps seen something familiar. And Solomon wasn't here to see it—wasn't here to celebrate the fact that her longed-for dream was real, that she wasn't crazy. He wasn't here to be smug and delighted and irritated at her absence. His absence was fresh all over again. She rubbed the tears out of her eyes, gulped them down. Sobbing was not considered very professional, even if it was only Meredith and Junichi to see her; they would understand, but she had her pride. She had sobbed herself to sleep for three months straight; she had learned how to corral the grief until it ebbed.

She settled herself at one end of camp and sank into the camp chair beside her tent. Solomon had stitched a sign for good luck into the fabric—he'd said it was Chinese, and Sandra knew he was probably right, but if it meant good luck or not, she doubted even he had known. It was suddenly unbearable to sit under this blue-green sky, under a yellow-white sun and feel the wind on her face. She wiped her face again—she hated how her tears made her cheeks ache, that rictus that grief gave to the human face—and stared at the damp shining on her brown fingers. This was such a human thing, to shed tears for the dead. For a week after the accident, she hadn't shed any tears, and when they had finally come it had felt like a storm. Forty days and forty nights, as her grandmother might have said.

She stared at the wall, the one that had drawn them all down here. It stood, solid and silent and enduring, she knew the people who had built it were gone. She could feel it, in her ribs, in her blood. Some things lived and some things died, and for whatever reason, they had died. Something had killed them, a fire or a flood or a comet or a volcano, but it had killed them, and for whatever reason, they had all gone, every one of them. Humans had satellites surrounding Cythera, had lived on two continents for nearly a century, and this—this barren place, with one wall and one vault—was the only evidence that the planet had seen any other higher life form. The loss washed over her, immense; for the moment, it washed her own grief into something wider, a sea instead of her own tiny pond.

Had they known they were dying out? Had they known they would go extinct? She could hardly imagine it—a society watching its own approaching end. She could barely bring herself to think of her own eventual death, though she knew it was coming; but that was a personal thing, a little extinction, not something massive, not the entire human species. She rubbed her eyes.

But perhaps extinction was not so different from the small deaths. Everyone died; everything died. What was the difference between a species-wide extinction and the death of one tiny person? Sandra had never given much thought to the idea that every human—every person—contained multitudes; it had always seemed a bit romantic and silly to her, some sort of intuitive religious nonsense, meant to comfort when the reality of death, of ending, loomed large. Maybe it still was, but now she could see its worth. Every death was an extinction, of small hopes and dreams and thoughts and experiences. Solomon's smiles, slightly crooked because he was always a little self-conscious of his teeth, and the way he had tugged on her braids. It only became overwhelming, worth noticing, when it happened on a large scale, a scale that humanity had not encountered yet, though not for lack of trying.

She shook her head and set the thoughts aside, with difficulty. Solomon had always been difficult to set aside; that was one of the reasons she had married him. But these thoughts were speculations, fantasies without facts to back them up. She pulled herself back to the work at hand, pulled herself into her love of the past and the possible window to the future that had first drawn her to this field. There were mountains more to do, cataloging and documenting and exploring, core samples taken from surrounding soils, climate analyses to do. She could not lose herself to fanciful ideas with no solid basis in reality.

Still, the moment had shaken her, and she felt a chill sweat breaking out and cooling on her forehead, her face, all along her arms. She took a deep breath, another. There was work to be done.

They stayed at the dig for weeks, until the changing seasons meant that the rain would come and make their progress into a crawl through mud. Meredith wanted to station guards,

actual *human* guards; Sandra had to point out how very impractical that particular idea was, though she herself longed to do the same. Androids could only do so much; who knew what damage would occur, despite their precautions? Damage from rain or damp, looters stealing whatever artifacts the team had not packed up to take with them. The entire site could be destroyed before they returned in the next dry cycle, despite doing all they could to protect it.

There was nothing for it, though. Sandra followed her fellows onto the plane, prepared for several hours of tedious travel. It would be worth it, to present their findings to the university; it would be worth it, to publish their findings. It would be worth it, to sleep in her own familiar bed, rather than a sleeping bag laid on rocks.

She stumbled into her own home many hours later, finding the foyer and the open kitchen and sitting room to be nearly alien in their own right, and as familiar as her own hands. She could still taste the dust on her tongue, still feel the gritty texture of the murals with her fingers. The house echoed empty around her. The sound of her luggage hitting the carpet was loud and unsettling.

She rubbed her hands over her face, looked at her palms, the seams and lines that crisscrossed the surface, the callouses. She was exhausted, her muscles tired after months of digging and crouching and bending and squinting over bits of rock, looking for anything that might resemble bone. She wanted to crawl into her own bed, sleep on her own blankets and pillows, in her own space.

Tomorrow, after she had eaten breakfast, drank real coffee, relaxed for a few hours in her quiet, too quiet home—tomorrow, she would pull the first box out of the closet, and open it.

LITTLE BLUE DOT

The only thing that ever made Opal speechless was the ships soaring over the moons, when both of them were full and the sky was lit only by the brief whizzing light of Phobos and the stars. The sight of them, shining with distant reflected sunlight, and the moons, cratered and shadowed and in the case of Deimos barely visible, against a background of dark void and bright stars—it took her breath from her the first time she had looked up and really seen it all. Their father had taken her up to the observatory and shown her, through the polished dome.

Otherwise, as Amber often said, it would take a mountain to make Opal shut up.

Opal took a certain amount of umbrage at this; she did not, as Amber said, “Speak so fast that it was like she wanted to swallow all the oxygen at once,” which was as dire an insult as had ever been hurled between sisters, but especially between ones living in an atmospheric dome on Mars. She spoke rather as fast as she could speak; she had so many thoughts and she liked to keep the rails between her brain and her mouth as greased as possible. Lately, though, the tracks had seemed to get gummed up.

She wished she lived on Earth. There the trees were so tall they brushed the edge of space, and the cities were glittering jewels, scrubbed clean and shining among fields of waving grass or snow-capped mountains; all the good vids said so. Their dad had said so. People lived there in high style, beautiful and graceful, with their dark arms decorated with gold bracelets, or their pale ears adorned with garnet earrings. On Earth, every meal was something to be exclaimed over; everything from the breakfast salad to the nightly meal of noodles and vegetables and delicious egg or even vat-grown protein, which once came from animals. On Earth, people danced in the warmth of the sun as it poured down like water from a river or a sea.

On Earth, people didn't die from stupid things. It was entirely different, better, more sophisticated than her little podunk backwater town, sixty kilometers from Olympus Mons and just on the edge of the equatorial taiga.

"I'm going to go to Earth someday," she said to Amber, not too long after the infamous oxygen comment. "I'll be all warm and I'll never have to see you again."

Amber brushed back her dark, natural curls and gave Opal a glance, backwards and twisting, in the bathroom mirror. "With what money?" she asked. She tied and pinned her hair until it was a barely-contained ponytail, and turned to give Opal the full force of her stare. "What would you do on Earth, anyway? They have more than enough mouthy little sisters."

Opal resisted sticking her tongue out, because she was mature and sophisticated and above that sort of thing—she had only last week turned eleven. "I don't know what I'll do yet," she said. "I need to get through med school first."

Amber snorted. "You've got to get through school *here* first," she said, and Opal probably did not imagine the derisive tone in her voice. In the last several months Amber had seemed to live in two states: utter disdain for her sister and a deep lethargy that it was hard to rouse her from. Opal preferred neither; she much preferred it when her sister's jabs had been happier and not so stinging all the time. Back when her sister would still hug her or squeeze her hand, just because. But all sorts of things were preferable Before than Now, and she had begun to realize none of them were going to change back.

"I'm doing good," she said, but her voice lacked conviction and she knew it.

"You need to do better," Amber said. She put on a necklace—some tarnished old thing that her ex-boyfriend had gotten her for cheap in Old Ares—and a pair of their father's earrings.

Not the bloodied ones they had had returned to them after the accident—these were dangling, chiming things, still shining. The pale metal gleamed against Amber’s dark skin. “Your grades haven’t been what they should be this year. They’ll hold you back and put you in counseling.”

“I’m already in counseling,” Opal pointed out.

“More counseling, then,” Amber said. Her voice was always so posh now, ever since she reached her majority—trying to be like the RP announcers on the local Old Arian radio stations, which, their father said, had once come from the UK, which was an Earth country. Truthfully every part of their colony—every city and tiny town on Mars—had come from an Earth country, but theirs had originally come from that one, and it was Opal’s favorite, even if she probably wouldn’t live there when she finally got to Earth. All the vids they had showed it to be cloudy, rather than sunny, even when they showed vids of Buckingham Palace and the monarchy and Parliament. She wanted to live somewhere sunny, and the UK seemed like the only place on Earth where the sun didn’t shine.

“I miss when you didn’t talk like that,” Opal blurted. Amber froze and stopped gathering up her things.

“I ain’t got time for this,” she said, in their rougher, country accent, and she threw on a headscarf and darted out the door without even reminding Opal that she needed to go to school.

Opal scowled at the door and flung herself into the greenhouse, one floor up. Their home, like every other home in Redmont, was lit by skylights, filtering sunlight that was filtered through the dome, which in turn was filtered through the thin Martian atmosphere. Only in the greenhouse was there light everywhere, clear solar panels allowing in light for the plants and generating their electricity as long as the sun shone down on them. She knew outside the dome it was grey and pink and dusty, except for the taiga, which was twisty and green-gray and

dark. But the dome filtered in the best of the sunlight, and she shucked her jumper for a warm, clear fabric jacket that allowed for vitamin D production and still kept her warm in the relative chill of the greenhouse.

The plants here were often hardy crosses of conifers, dwarf pines, smaller versions of every green tree in the taiga. They soaked in carbon dioxide—some of their best plants were said to have been shipped to Earth, early in the days after their discovery, because they were so good at taking out carbon dioxide and pumping out fresh oxygen. Opal breathed deep, almost defiantly so, and ran her hand over the scaly forked green leaves of one of the dwarf trees. She had always thought they looked like little alien fingers—the only green fingers ever found or grown on Mars.

The air in the greenhouse was crisp and sharp with plant smells, and she pulled it in. This was as close as she had ever gotten to the green woods—she was not old enough or educated enough or experienced enough to go out with crews in their silly clunky suits to evaluate the evolving forest ecosystem outside the domes, like Amber, like every other adult in town. She was allowed out of the house, to trundle around Redmont like the rest of the kids, and that was it.

She pressed her palms against the solar glass wall. Redmont was a collection of greenhouses, one after another, concentric circles of sparkling glass houses, greenery shining inside, beneath the pale peach of the atmospheric dome. Amber could be outside now, cleaning off the top of it, freeing it from the dust that settled over it like rust, giving them a sunny day. Or maybe today she was in the taiga, carrying out some arcane gathering mission, like some witch in a fairy tale, except wearing an atmospheric shelter suit. Opal didn't know and didn't really care, not really. Except for the witch part. Amber was definitely a witch.

Amber came home that night, and when she saw the automatic alert informing her that Opal had missed school—again—she sighed and gave her sister a tired look. Opal had tried to disable it, but the blasted thing was behind a fingerprint-ID scanner and so was the damned alarm light.

“All you need to do is go to school,” Amber said, as she pulled off her jewelry and set it aside. “Did you at least do something useful around here? Pick some veg for dinner? Start the noodles?”

“No,” Opal said, resentfully. She’d hidden under her favorite conifer in the greenhouse, and dreamt of Earth most of the day. Before the accident, that would have been Opal’s job, her job with the help of their dad. Now it was just hers, dreadful and dull and lonely. “We’re low on noodles, anyway.”

Amber shook her head. “Fine. We’ll order more. But honestly, couldn’t you have done one thing? Especially since you’re no closer to that med-school-Earth dream.”

“I changed my mind,” Opal said, even as she banged around their small kitchen. “I think I’ll be an engineer instead.”

“Still no closer than you were this morning,” Amber pointed out, more snidely than called for, in Opal’s opinion.

“Whatever,” Opal said, heating water and pulling the dried noodles out of a drawer. “You’re still talking posh, quit it. You’re not posh.”

“No,” Amber said, “but if I want to get into U of M it helps to speak *properly*, not like I just stepped off the backwoods train from the sticks. They aren’t supposed to discriminate, but everyone knows they do, especially people like us.”

“Poor people?”

“Poor black people,” Amber said. “They always have something in their back pockets to trip up poor black people. Especially out here. Received Pronunciation is the name of the game, Opal, so don’t go banging on about it. I practice because I need to.”

“You can’t go to U of M, anyway,” Opal said. She was looking hard at the noodles, as they roiled and foamed in the water. “It’s too far away, in New Olympia. No one would take care of me here.”

“Cause you talk too much,” Amber said, carelessly—or it seemed that way to Opal, watching her older sister out of the corner of her eye.

“I don’t.”

“Do too, usually about things you don’t know much about,” Amber said.

“When I get to Earth—”

“Like that,” Amber said. She set the vegetables down on the kitchen counter and glared at the side of Opal’s head. “You don’t know anything about Earth, not really. You think it’s all glitter and sweetness over there, but it isn’t.”

“How would you know?”

“I listen to people,” Amber said. “I listen to the news. I do all sorts of reading. I read *history*. And Earth is just as messed up now as it was hundreds of years ago, when we first came here.”

Opal glowered at the noodles. She did not need Amber to tell her she was sulking; she knew she was, could feel it curdling and unpleasant in her chest and in her head. It wasn’t just sullenness; she was tasting the bitter salt of disappointment. Amber could be cruel and obnoxious, but she rarely said things she didn’t believe.

“Noodles are almost done,” she said, belligerent.

“Good,” Amber said, and did something with the vegetables that meant they were steamy and cooked. “Right. Drain them and we can have some din.”

Opal was never certain afterwards what she did wrong—pressed the wrong button or toggled the wrong switch, whatever—but the noodles were not drained, they exploded, barely missed her face and covered her dark braids with little bits of overcooked, raining semolina. The steam condensed on the ceiling, the air hot and silent for several long seconds. Amber fairly screamed at her.

“Good *Christ*, Opal, what the bloody fuck did you do?” Her sister dragged her away from the kitchen, swept trembly brown hands over her face, stared at her as if that in and of itself counted as a medical check-over. “Jesus, *Jesus*, can you see? Are you okay? You *know* the cookers out here are all old and temperamental, what the hell did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything!” Opal yelled back. She was shaking. Her hair smelled like undercooked pasta. Her face felt hot and tight, but not like a burn or a scald, just like she was going to cry. She detested tears.

“I hate it here,” Opal shouted. “I hate all of it—the dome and the skylights and the greenhouses and the stupid old cookers and you, too!”

Amber watched her tantrum with cool brown eyes, her face at first crumpled and then smoothing out, like some strange reverse sculpture. Opal noticed that Amber’s curls were trembling, though the rest of her seemed stone-still. “Right,” she said. Her voice was clipped and sharp. “Right. You don’t like it here, then I’ll show you the only alternative.”

She grabbed Opal’s arm and tugged her up the greenhouse stairs and out into Redmont proper. Night was falling and Phobos was just beginning to peek over the horizon. Opal’s curiosity began to outweigh her anger and apprehension, and after a minute or two she was

matching Amber's pace, briskly stomping along some of the small paved streets of their tiny little town.

They were heading for the shuttle station at the edge, close to the institute and university annexes. From there one could take a train all the way to New Olympia or Old Ares, a shuttle to the taiga, and from there a tram, as many of the trees were reaching truly ridiculous heights. Opal could still see the taiga through the dome, a great dark greenish smudge along one stretch of it. The sun was setting on the other side of it, and Phobos was rising over it, rapidly as it always did. Their feet made quick rhythmic thumps against the roadway.

"We need two suits," Amber said to the man watching the station. "One small, one large, please." She dug out a credit card and handed it over. "One hour's rent. My little sister wants to see the forest."

"Poor time for it," the man said—his name was Dusty Roberts, and Opal had never particularly liked him one way or the other. Amber had always been polite with him, but Opal rather thought he was a little rat masquerading as a man. "The best time's high noon, when you can see everything in the best light."

"Needs must," Amber said, and tersely handed Opal a suit. She was thorough and clipped as she showed Opal how to put it on, where the oxygen was, how much was left (it was fully charged, as it should be), and the internal radio.

"Right," Amber said, as soon as she'd finished her own checks. "Right. We're going. Come on, airlock's this way."

Opal followed, her anger and restlessness converted into a bubbling, trembling excitement. She had never been outside the dome—train trips to other cities didn't count, no one had ever let her set foot outside before, no one had ever let her put on a suit and walk around,

beyond the reach of the gravity machines beneath each colony. Her only complaint was that the suit was a little smelly and warm, and she couldn't feel any air against her skin. "You can take me out? How come we never did before? Da would've—"

"Da didn't," Amber snapped. "And he wouldn't have, either. You get all your dreams from him, you know."

"But—"

"You will *stay by me*," Amber said, "or this will be the last time you leave Redmont before you're an adult, do you understand? It's dangerous out here." The doors slid shut behind them and there was a sharp brief pressure before the door in front of them clicked open. Amber shoved it with her shoulder, and grabbed Opal's gloved hand in one of her own. "Come on," she said, and they stepped through the airlock together.

Opal felt the difference in gravity almost immediately. The ground was no longer faintly vibrating—it was instead still, and she felt lighter than she ever had before. Amber walked carefully, her hand tight around her sister's, and showed her how to walk over the red-gray earth, how to step on the stones and not turn an ankle when they slid against each other. The taiga loomed up ahead of them, the trees seeming almost as mountains to Opal's vision. They towered, and she realized with a start that the taiga was actually farther away from the dome, much farther than she's always thought, because the forest from inside the dome looked like a normal strand of trees, like the pines and the firs grown inside the dome, but they weren't—they were larger, taller, their branches swaying and whipping in a high breeze with alarming dexterity. Their shadows spiked against the violet-red sky, the branches spreading dark fingers against the stars. She imagined them reaching out and snatching the carbon dioxide from the air around them, twisting it in their leaves.

“You dream about Earth,” Amber said. She looked up, and Opal followed her eyes. The sun was nearly down, the inside of the dome beginning to light up with street lamps and lights shining up from the skylights in the ground. The stars were beginning to appear, whole groups of them peppering the sky all at once. Amber looked around, then pointed to one, a little barely-there bluish one.

“That’s it,” she said. “That’s Earth, where our great-whatever grandparents came from. And you know what they were thinking? That they’d like to leave Earth and come here, because here had to be better.”

“But it’s... sort of rubbish here,” Opal said, staring at the little blue dot in a sea of blue-white stars. She had already known one couldn’t really see Earth properly from Mars—it was in all the educational vids about it—but she still expected something a bit more... spectacular. Other stars were blue, or blue-white—the Earth hardly stood out at all.

Amber sighed. “You’re not listening, Opal. Mars and Earth are the same. The only difference is here, we can’t breathe the air yet.” She knocked, gently, on Opal’s helmet with her knuckles. “We need protection outside here. And even on Earth, you need it—even with the thick atmosphere, the sun can still give you cancer. The poles are all frozen, and you still need to dress warm there. There’s volcanoes, and if you aren’t careful, you could find a pocket of gas that presses out all the oxygen, so you still suffocate.”

She bent down, so that Opal could see her face, through the dark and two panes of thick glass. “On Earth, people still die.”

“Stupid,” Opal said, but it was a weak noise. “Thought they’d fixed that.”

“No,” Amber said. “They still haven’t fixed that. And sometimes people still die in accidents, like they do here. Only Earth is a little more likely to see someone live.” Her hand squeezed tight around Opal’s through the gloves. “I know you miss him. Me too.”

Opal wished she could rub at her face or tug on a braid or fiddle with her earrings, something to feel more in her own skin. She couldn’t; she was insulated from even her own touch, but she could feel the pressure of Amber’s hand, still holding tightly to her own through two layers of thick fabrics.

“Look,” Amber said. Her voice, tinny through the comms, was softer. “I ain’t saying you can’t go to Earth someday. I’m saying it ain’t necessarily better than here.” She stood up straight, and looked not towards a little blue speck, but towards a dim glow, further down and just over the rise of the horizon. “I mean to take online classes while you’re growing,” she said. “Once I get a degree—or a cert or a cred, whichever comes first—I’ll see about getting a job, and then we’ll move. As long as I’m employed, we can move, and we won’t have to be stuck in Redmont forever.” She squeezed Opal’s hand. “You’ll like New Olympia. Dad took you there once, right?”

“When we was little,” Opal said, in a small voice. She had liked it—what she could remember, she had been quite young—but the thought of it anymore came with the thoughts of her father, the way he had put her up on his shoulders so that she could see all the buildings, painted a soft pink-red like poppies. She detested crying, and that’s all the memories seemed to make her do, just dissolve into a messy flood of tears.

“Right. But you gotta do your part, twerp. You gotta go to school and *do* it, not just sit about and dream. Otherwise, that—” and she pointed back towards their town in its little dome,

“that is all you’re ever going to see of all the world, not to mention the universe. And you’re right, Redmont’s kind of rubbish, but it’s what we’ve got.”

“It is,” Opal said again, but even as she did she was looking around, at the sky—only filtered now through one layer of glass and the thin cloak of Mars’ atmosphere—at the grey-pink rocks at her feet, at the shadowy taiga, invisibly breathing. Her sister’s hand was still covered in layers of fabric, but Opal’s hand felt warmer through the contact. Far in front of them the forest sighed in the wind. The stars gleamed, arced over them. Opal felt light, light, light.

“I’m sorry I botched dinner,” she said, because she hadn’t said sorry. “I don’t know what I did.”

“We never do,” Amber said. She sounded a little sad; then she squeezed Opal’s palm and said, “Come on, then. Time to go in.”

“Can we come back out?” Opal almost hated pulling her eyes away from the taiga and moving back towards the dome. “Can you take me inside the forest?”

Amber’s face was getting harder to read. What sunlight there was had faded, faded, until the sky was violet-blue and the brightest lights came from Redmont itself. But in the shadows it looked as though she smiled.

“Do better in school, and yeah,” she said, and guided her sister back home.

THANATOS

It began before the dreams—Arthur was completely certain of that. But the dreams goaded him on, no matter what interpretation the psychologists would put on it.

He dreamed memories—finding birds, or creatures not unlike birds, rotting on the beaches of the planet Circe, where he'd been a biologist. There had been creatures that were something like the next step in the evolution of avians. He had been young then, so absurdly young—barely forty, not even out of his first century. They had tried to dissuade him from biology, that half-taboo subject, but in the end he had insisted. He had studied cells, animal and plant and the gradations down the evolutionary trees from thereon; knew the way human cells had been carefully altered, the delicate manipulation of enzymes, knew that humans never rotted anymore, not naturally. No one laid down and putrefied of old age; old age had been soundly defeated.

His dreams held old carcasses of saurisins, their wings tattered and the feathers scattered; the smell of rotting vegetable matter, overlaid by a smell of coniferous needles. It had never bothered him then; it had been an interesting dimension to his work, the observation of the process of decay. It would, after all, not happen to him.

The thanatologist wore a mask, but no gloves. Arthur privately thought that was one reason why everyone found them so unsettling—every thanatologist wore a mask when moving among the regular people, masks shaped like animals or flying creatures or even masks made to look like broad green leaves. He didn't know if it was custom or law; it usually varied, depending on the planet and the culture, in his experience. On Juno, it appeared to be a mixture.

The masks marked them as different, made them stand out, but no one could say if that was better or worse than a thanatologist without their mask. The ungloved hands were strange, light brown with knotted joints.

The mask was like a bird—a long, thin beak, eyeholes surrounded by bright feathers. Arthur, despite desiring the meeting, found the mask, and the eyes behind the mask, difficult to look at. They were a golden-bright brown, sharp and piercing, knowledgeable, disconcerting. The gaze of the thanatologist was direct; the gaze of someone who had seen the still and unmoving bodies of the murdered and the victims of accident. No one else ended anymore; no one else needed the arts of the thanatologists.

“You requested this meeting,” the thanatologist said. By the timbre of the voice it was a man, but Arthur knew that was not always a fact. He knew better than to assume. “Not many do that. What did you wish to talk about?”

Arthur rubbed his palms on his trousers, nervous. The park was deserted at this time of day—strange, but not suspicious. No one liked to socialize with the handlers of the finished. “I wanted to know,” he said, “for my own education, if you knew of anyone who had passed into sleep of old age. Not true old age, of course,” he said, “but—one of the Pinnacle Generations. If any of them had simply gone to sleep and not—not woken up.”

The thanatologist was silent for a long moment. “Not to my knowledge,” he said. “The last natural end of old age was several centuries ago.”

Arthur had more or less known that. The old woman had finished peacefully and without fuss, and it had been covered extensively in the media—the last end of old age, the last human falling to natural entropy. The media had celebrated as though the scientific miracles were of their own making. But one never knew what the thanatologists spoke about, who they might see

in the dark hours, away from the eyes of the vibrant and living. One never knew what they did when a man had been murdered, when an accident had occurred and someone needed to carry away the evidence. One never knew, unless they had entered those enclaves and undergone their bizarre rites.

“I’ve heard rumors,” Arthur said. “That sometimes, when someone feels they’ve lived their life, they might, ah, go to you.”

There was another long, loaded silence. The thanatologist blinked behind the bird mask.

“I’m afraid that is simply an urban legend,” he said. He stood up and inclined his head. “Nice speaking with you,” he said, and walked away.

Fireworks sparkled off the reflection of Juno’s smooth green-blue sea, turned black now with the twilight and sweep of stars. One of the moons hovered close to the horizon—it never rose above it, as its orbit was such that “rising” and “falling” were useless adjectives. Arthur watched the reflections, the sea, the moons, and thought about the way he just didn’t feel like joining the party, currently being held on the avenues and curling side streets of Juno’s capital city. The spires and domes of Juturna were shining in the light from lamps and glittering when the fireworks burst above them, exploding with whistling bangs that momentarily drowned out the din from the city. It was an anniversary—the anniversary of the day humanity had pulled itself free from the need to evolve.

Arthur sipped a solitary beer and turned away from the city. One of Juno’s native creatures was snuffling along the beach, its eyes moon-pale and shining in the dark. It was herbivorous, sucking and grinding the plants that washed up out of the ocean—pulpy sea grasses, kelp with bulbous, air-filled sacs in the shape of leaves. They would lie on the sand and rot, but

the creatures—sometimes affectionately called the cleaners—got them first. But would it be so bad, Arthur wondered, if one did just lay there and rot? Would it be restful?

He had no desire to go to the revels. He had lost his taste for the anniversary years ago, and after a while all of his friends had either moved away—three new worlds were opened up, just in the last twenty years—or they had simply stopped asking him to come. He had enjoyed the celebrations, but lately they had palled and left him feeling empty and annoyed, more than jubilant and triumphant.

Once, on Minerva—or perhaps it had been Medea? He couldn't remember—he had asked his third wife if she had ever thought of becoming a thanatologist. He had thought about such a profession, briefly, when he was young.

She had turned her face away. “No one could ever want such a perverse occupation,” she had said. Her eyes, when she did look at him again, were shuttered. “Who would want to deal with such terrible subjects? Arthur, it isn't right. We're at the apex of our evolution. We've mastered our biology. Why would anyone want to dwell on the failures? They don't deserve our attention.” She had brushed her auburn hair back into a thick ponytail. “They've decided on a dead-end evolution, my dear. They're mayflies; let them shine and die on their own.”

It had started when he realized he was getting tired—tired of the endless careers, the bouts of schooling, the roar of cities and the ever-present work of living in the country. Of socializing with other people, which he had never had a problem doing before—never been the kind to withdraw and seek solitude. It wore at him a little at a time, but it wasn't until he sat on the beach that he realized why he didn't want to join in with the festivities—he was more interested in the way the sea shifted in and out, the way the sea plants washed upon the shore, the way the cleaners shuffled about with their pale watching eyes. It was a cycle he had seen over

and over again, through his time as a biologist and botanist; that cycle of birth and decay, the beginnings and the endings. He had begun, many, many years ago, and now he had begun to wonder: when was he going to end?

The lyre was one he had constructed himself, after three years of study under a master instrument maker. He oiled the wood and thought about how old it was getting. How old he was getting.

He strummed the strings slowly, meditatively. The sound was low and mournful; the lyre was not the harp, and he was a little dismayed to realize he had not played in such a long time that he had lost his calluses. Arthur thought briefly about picking the lyre up again, developing them again—and then he set it back down in its place, in his home which was a portrait of his life and his travels. The thought of ending, of never playing the lyre again, settled something in him which had been twitching and unhappy for a longer time than he had ever known.

Something else in his head whispered: what comes after ending? Did anything come after?

The rest of him thought: did it matter?

In his dreams, he heard lamentations. Singing. He woke with tears on his face and a longing to hear them with his ears. He had tried reaching out again to the thanatologist, the only one he knew of in Juturna, but they had not responded.

He had lost track of the number of places he had lived. New Jerusalem's towers of stone blended into the golden sandstone of the domes and temples of New Mumbai. Minarets and

synagogues laced the streets of Neo Kyoto, nestled between frondy trees and red-painted torii. People were not quite as indistinguishable as places, but people he knew in one place he knew he would meet in others—every time a planet hit their population quota, there would be a push to move somewhere else, so that the younger generations could raise children. Arthur had lost count of the number of times he had moved.

He did like Juno, though. He lived in an area that was heavily forested, despite the rising human population. Conifers and leafy evergreens were the sorts of trees Juno tended to support, temperate rainforests that sported flowers not unlike bromeliads, only smaller and more violet. Here there was a love of plants, and Arthur had always been partial to that sort of sentiment. Now he found his favorite thing to do was walk through woods and find old trees that had fallen—and even on alien planets, fibrous plants made good growing spaces for new ones, mosses and fungi and microbes of all kinds. Mycelia were especially prolific here after the rainy season.

Arthur did not like cities, as a rule. Humans tried to keep them small, but they spilled out, spread indolently over landscapes. Always people, people, people, talking on their phones or monitoring robots of some kind, and insisting on socializing. When he had been very young, it had been exciting, thrilling to be in a city with so many people. When he was older, it had been normal, and he had long since learned how to navigate, how to deal with noise or with unpleasant individuals, and how to enjoy all the things the city had to offer—restaurants, music, plays, films, games of all kinds, even people-watching. Now he could barely stand to be around anyone else; even his visit with the thanatologist had been an effort.

He dreamed of cities full of people, lying on their backs or curled on their sides, completely silent, peaceful, quiet in the sun and under the light of the stars. Sometimes they were wrapped in elaborate shrouds, sometimes they were in clear plastic casings, sometimes they were decorated with flowers.

This dream had used to terrify him; now he found it comforting. He wanted to find such a place, a peaceful and silent city of the dead.

At last, at last, at last.

The thanatologist had agreed to meet him again.

He was walking through one of Juno's wilder parks, his favorite one—the one with violet-needled conifers and broad-leaved ferns, trees so tall they cast long, cool shadows over the paths and where the ferns framed the smaller, lesser-known dirt paths through the thick trees—when he saw the thanatologist, coming toward him on the path. He couldn't tell if it was the same one he had met with; they were said to have a different mask for every day of the week. Today the mask was that of a black bird, a crow.

“Evening,” he said. It was the same one. The thanatologist cocked his head, and gestured toward one of the dirt paths.

“Walk with me,” he said, and stepped into the woods. Arthur did not hesitate to follow.

They walked, until the shadows grew deeper and the only sunlight was distant and green, filtered through the leaves. Arthur remembered why he had switched to botany, as his central career—it was restful, to know about plants, about all the minute stages of growth they went through. Plants were so quiet, so silent, compared to other living things. Restful.

“Do you still want to die, Arthur?” the thanatologist asked, and reached up to remove—her mask, as it turned out. Her face was softened by the shadows, her eyes golden-bright brown and her voice still so deep. Most fascinating was the way her skin was wrinkled delicately, all over her face—they spread like soft wings from the corners of her eyes and mouth. “Is that still something you desire?”

His heart thudded. He felt like an old man in a young body, and unable to really appreciate that—because when had he ever known different? When did anyone ever know different? But he knew that things ended—everything had an end, everything deteriorated. Humanity had just made old age take the long, long route, rather than the neat curve it had had when they had first evolved.

“I do,” he said. “I still want to rest.”

She inclined her head. Her hair was some light color—in the dim illumination of the woods, it looked almost silver. “Fine then. There are some fungi growing behind this tree. Do you know what kind they are?”

He knelt and looked. He did know. They were slender things, beautiful the way fungus is beautiful; he touched one of the smooth brown caps with a gentle finger. “I know,” he said. “They're lethal.”

“Yes,” the thanatologist said. “Only if you eat them. You could eat them here, and die on this forest path for someone to find. Or you might take them home, and eat them in a salad, or a soup.” She paused, watching him. “I've been told they are quite palatable.”

He glanced at her. She inclined her head. “You have their location,” she said, “and there are always clumps of them, growing through this park. In case someone needs an accident.”

Arthur smiled—an awkward, crooked smile. “Do you harvest them often, then? For accidents?”

“No,” she said. “I’ve never harvested them at all. I only... make sure that they remain.” She pulled her mask back on, over her light hair, over her creased and marvelous face. “You know where they are; the rest is up to you.” She turned and trod slowly down the path—either waiting for him to come to his senses, or to keep her steps quiet, to keep this place silent and private.

He thought about calling after her, asking why—but that wasn't the mystery he wanted to explore. He looked down at the mushrooms, the thin slender stalks and the small, tight caps, and thought of what he wanted to see before he died, who he wanted to speak to, where he wanted to die. He thought the path might be a good place—silly old biologist, mistook some lethal mushrooms for benign ones—and the way the sun filtered down through the leaves of the ferns, and the way everything took on a strange, sad, lovely light. He looked down at the mushrooms again, where they curled up from the soil, between the roots of the overhanging conifer. Their caps were smooth but not slimy. He thought of eating one at his home, where he might not be found for a long while. He thought of going home, parceling out his possessions over weeks or months or years to family and friends he barely spoke to anymore. He thought of eating the caps here, and sinking into the mast, and watching the sun spin lazily down and pull the night behind it. He thought of the thanatologist’s strange knotted fingers, the way the skin on her hands seemed so soft and creased, and how those hands would close his eyes, brush his hair, wrap his empty body into a cloth and make it disappear from sight.

Something with wings flittered through the trees, and he settled himself more fully onto the ground. There was a patch of sky visible between the leaves, and the stars were always

brilliant on Juno—not even the light pollution of Juturna could dim them. He could lie here and watch them wheel by until everything grew dark.

Arthur swallowed with a dry throat. He thought he could do that—thought he could stay and wait for the stars to come out, one last time.

MIRACLE CITY

Phoebe knew she was pregnant the morning she woke up and nearly vomited from the combined smell of leftover vindaloo and decaying lilies. It was almost an irrational conclusion to come to; she hadn't had sex in so long that she'd nearly forgotten what it felt like with another person. But she knew she was pregnant, the way she knew it was morning, in her body and in her skin. It was an unnerving thing to think, to suspect; but unnerving had begun to be commonplace.

The certainty only grew over the course of her day. She couldn't shake it, no matter how much she told herself it was silly. At lunch she ducked into a pharmacy and bought a pregnancy test. She ignored the mural of Asclepius and used the public restroom. Five minutes later, she had a positive result, and her stomach did a sick, twisting sort of flip.

Well, she thought. She certainly hadn't been doing anything that would lead to such a situation, and parthenogenesis wasn't actually something humans could do, which left only one other possibility. *Damnation.*

The mural seemed to watch her as she left. Phoebe did her best to ignore it, as she ignored most of the murals, statues, and shrines that peppered the city; she found the eyes to be disturbing, arresting in an overwhelming demand that made her uncomfortable. Instead she hurried back to her car, and sat for a long while, staring at her reflection in the dashboard glass over the odometer. Her blood thrummed in her ears and she imagined she could feel it rushing through her veins, through every part of herself, unasked.

“I’m pregnant,” she said to her sister that night. Andrea sipped her drink and didn’t respond at once. Like Phoebe, she liked to take the full measure of a situation and then speak.

“I won’t ask if you’re sure,” Andrea said. “But I will ask if there’s something I should know.”

Phoebe restlessly gathered up their dinner plates and set them on the kitchen counter. She felt off balance and swollen, though when she had checked earlier in the bathroom mirror, she hadn’t seen any visible changes. It should be far, far too early for any of that yet, anyway. “I think it’s a god,” she said. “Parthenogenesis is not exactly the most likely option, and I haven’t even had a one-night stand in years.”

“Pity,” Andrea said, but she swirled the wine in her glass and pursed her lips. “I had a coworker—did I tell you?—said she was impregnated by a swan. Named her baby Helen.” She laughed, unkindly. “Seemed more than happy about it, if you ask me, but it takes all kinds, especially now.”

“I would have noticed a swan, I think,” Phoebe said. “If only for the fact that they’re vicious beasts.”

She and her sister shared a smile over this, though to Phoebe it felt strained, as though she had painted her lips into the shape.

“Feathers everywhere,” Andrea agreed. “So how do you feel about it?”

“I don’t know,” Phoebe said. “Shocked, still. I mean, I didn’t even get a by-your-leave. Or a note. Or anything. Not even a dream.”

“So whoever he is, the god-dad is a dick,” Andrea said. “Do you want to keep it?”

Phoebe opened her mouth, took a breath, stopped. “I don’t know,” she said. “I—maybe if he’d bought me dinner first—”

“Bullshit,” Andrea said. “You don’t even give human guys the time of day.”

Phoebe dropped the plates carelessly into the sink and started the water running. “I don’t know,” she said. “I mean, it’s immaculate conception, it’s not like a condom broke and I can phone the dad and tell him I want joint custody or something.”

Andrea slinked up and leaned against the counter. “Okay,” she said, softly. “Okay. Set that aside for the mo. What do you want to do, right now? Find out who the dad is? Have some wine? Throw something?”

“All of the above,” Phoebe said, glanced at her sister, and the moment became too much, too overtly ridiculous, and she burst into giggles that edged with a squeezing in her chest.

“Ah, there’s the hysterics, right on cue,” Andrea said. She set down her glass and looped her arms around Phoebe’s shoulders, pressed her face against Phoebe’s hair.

“Fuck your hysterics,” Phoebe said. Her eyes were wet and her face was tight. “I’m allowed.”

“It’s not Zeus,” Andrea said. Phoebe agreed; by all accounts he was a flash bastard who liked people to know when he’d done any fathering. He wasn’t the sort of god who pretended to be faithful; he liked it when people realized he’d impregnated something. Phoebe had never seen the point in being proud of something every heterosexually reproducing species had managed since the dawn of sexual reproduction, but he was a god, and there wasn’t much one could say to them.

“I’m not sure it matters who it was,” Phoebe said. “It’s not like I can sue for child support.”

“True that,” Andrea said, and drained her mug. They were back in the living room, on Phoebe’s overstuffed couch, the remains of coffee and cake spread over the coffee table. “What are you going to do?”

Phoebe sank into her seat, and stared at her sister. She didn’t know what she was going to do. She looked down at the cake, at her body, still feeling swollen but not quite seeming swollen. She felt as if she were on a swaying tightrope, high above a busy downtown street. “I should want it,” she said. “Everyone says it’s a blessing, right?”

“Blessings come in all sorts of ways,” Andrea said, slowly. “Not always in the form of something squealing and needing its diaper changed, you know.”

“Lots of women want to be pregnant,” Phoebe said. She scraped the fork against the ceramic plate harshly, screeching. “I should be happy.”

Andrea leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. “Well,” she said, “you aren’t.”

“You’ll be keeping it, of course,” said her supervisor when she decided to break the news to him. Phoebe nodded, perfunctorily; she wasn’t interested in having a long discussion about it. “Well, we can schedule some leave time once you’re far enough along. Be careful of what you eat, now, and let me know when he’s born!”

That was something Phoebe had noticed—in the last week, everyone she had spoken to about her situation had not only assumed she was carrying a son, but that she was happy to be pregnant. She found the latter rather confusing, as she was still quite uncertain how to feel about it; whenever she tried to pin down her feelings, she could only feel as if she were on a pendulum, swinging swiftly from one extreme to another. She tried to get off on the side of enthusiasm, the way everyone around her seemed to be doing, but each time she felt herself swinging back to that

dark, uncertain, angry place. She felt as if there were no solid place to stand, just shifting ground that threatened to unbalance her whichever way she turned.

She wished now she'd kept things a bit more secret. It was her habit to hold things close to her, but with this she had felt so knocked sideways that her habit had fallen away like old leaves. But she had to acknowledge that the situation itself didn't allow for secrecy; only a week or so in and she had begun to swell around the middle, her jeans becoming tight and uncomfortable between one day and the next. She had had nightmares of being seven months pregnant, her belly a horrid fertile growth.

Knocked up, more like, she thought, with a sudden streak of dark humor. It had seemed unreal in the first few days, and now it felt doubly so now, a week after the realization, the test, the confirmation of some weird inner intuition. And worse was the creeping feeling that she was not doing it right. Pregnant women were supposed to glow, to be flush with anticipation at bringing new life into the world. Phoebe largely felt flattened, pressed out of shape.

"I know of a demi-god play group," a coworker said to her later that afternoon. "You won't be needing it for a while, obviously, but—well, the godborn, they're quick to grow up, you know? You'll want to have lots of things on hand when he's born—especially if he's the type to start a new religion."

This rather alarming facet hadn't even occurred to Phoebe. "Oh," she said, stunned all over again. "I haven't been paying attention. Is that likely?"

"More often than not," her coworker said. "Who knows—maybe you've got the next Jesus on the way!" This was said with a certain cheerful nonchalance. Phoebe felt her stomach lurch upwards, jiggling like a squirming live thing, and she must have reflected that on her face because her coworker said, "Oh, there's the morning sickness, right on time."

When she found she needed new trousers, she called her sister.

“I can’t do this,” she said. Her voice sounded strange to her own ears. “Andy, I really can’t do this. It’s not even been a week and I’m outgrowing my clothes. This is *insane*.”

“Okay,” Andrea said. “Look, I’ll be over in ten minutes, and we’ll decide what to do then, okay? And I’ll bring some of my fat pants, or some overalls. You might squeeze into those.”

Phoebe ended the call, frustrated for the first time that cell phones did not allow the catharsis of a good hard slam of the receiver. Andrea had made being a bitch into an artform.

Andrea did not appear especially apologetic once she had arrived, bringing with her a bag of clothes that were, indeed, big enough for Phoebe’s new girth. Phoebe grabbed a set of overalls and disappeared into her bedroom. Her belly was beginning to pooch out. Her skin had jagged, fresh stretch marks that had not been there that morning.

“So,” Andrea said, once Phoebe had emerged, “what’s going on?”

Phoebe pulled back the overalls and let her sister see for herself. “This is not normal. I’ve never been pregnant, but I’m pretty sure of that!”

Andrea’s brows went up, but she showed no other sign of surprise. “Well,” she said. “That puts a different face on things.”

Phoebe scrubbed her hands over her face. “What do I do?” she asked. “I don’t want this.”

Andrea shrugged. “Depends. You can wait until the little spawnling comes out on its own, though....” She looked distinctly uncomfortable for the first time. Phoebe shivered.

“Sometimes that’s not the best idea, really.”

Phoebe grimaced. She'd heard the stories. She had never given them much credit, but now the thought of one of those stories involving *her* made her feel ill and a little faint. She took a deep breath and scrubbed her hands over her face. She swayed slightly, a pendulum, coming to a decision, reorienting her center of gravity.

"I don't want it," she said, quietly. Andrea leaned against the wall and folded her arms. "I didn't ask for it, I don't have anything for it, and I don't want it."

"Okay," Andrea said. "So what do you want to do? Have you gotten that far?"

Phoebe licked her lips, though her mouth felt dry. "Yes," she said. "I don't want this. I want it gone."

Andrea slid her phone from her jeans pocket and flicked it to life. "Let me see what we can do about that," she said.

"I don't believe this," Andrea moaned later that afternoon. "Three clinics and nothing. How is that even possible?"

"I've gotten bigger," Phoebe said. "Maybe they don't think I'm telling the truth."

Andrea scoffed. "There was an immaculate conception on the news last month," she said. "I know there's gotta be some sort of rule about this."

"Yeah," Phoebe growled. "If you look six months pregnant, no dice." She flicked the overall straps open and shoved the apron down beneath her belly. She didn't even want to touch it—the growth of it felt so alien—but it felt as though if she didn't, she'd have to have Andrea cut her out of the overalls with a pair of garden shears. "I don't suppose you have anything else in the car I could wear? I swear I've outgrown these in the last two hours." She rubbed her stomach uncertainly, and snatched her hand back. In only a week it had expanded, pushed out,

swelled like some sort of mushroom beneath her skin. She tried not to think about mycelia and fruiting bodies.

“I’ve got more clothes in the back,” Andrea said, and hopped out to dig through the plastic bag stashed in the back seat. “Maybe I’ve got a skirt or something. Something with elastic in the waist.”

Phoebe squirmed out of the overalls and waited until Andrea shoved a skirt between the seats. It was a patchwork of black and purple squares. “God, a flashback I didn’t need to your time as a teenage goth,” she said, but she put it on. The elastic in the waist was stretched and fell easily over the bump. The car shook as Andrea slammed the back door and jostled as she slid into the driver’s seat. She flicked the hard plastic pair of lucky dice hanging from the rear-view mirror.

“Well, there’s a clinic off Hammond,” she said. “We could try that, I guess.”

“No,” Phoebe said. She’d had enough of the darting looks and thoughtful hums and we’re so sorry’s. She was not going to be getting the operation she wanted and needed—not today, not from the clinics in the city that had demure goddess decorating their windows or portraits of Zeus over the door. “No. This isn’t working.”

Andrea drummed her fingers on the wheel. “Okay,” she said, slowly, patiently. “Okay. What do you want to do, then?”

The late afternoon sun was trailing over the skyline of the city. Phoebe watched the shapes the branches and bare square walls made against the golden light of it. “The municipal park,” she said. “You remember, my last—”

“Yeah, I do,” Andrea said. “Yeah, all right, all right. Just leave it to me.”

The park was mostly empty at the late hour. The air was warm but beginning to cool, and Phoebe could see the moon beginning to rise in the sky opposite the setting sun. It was full.

“You sure you want to do this now?” Andrea asked. She dug a flashlight out of the trunk of the car. “How long ago did you learn all this herbal stuff again? How do you know you won’t be picking dandelions or something super-poisonous?”

“That’s what the flashlight’s for,” Phoebe said, and took it from her sister’s hands. Her feet were beginning to feel swollen in her sandals, and her hips were aching. “Come on.” The gates to the park were not shut—they were never shut—but the trees rose up, dark shapes, and the shadows getting deeper by the moment. Phoebe led the way into the park, and—a little to her surprise—Andrea followed.

The path was narrow, and slid from paved asphalt to cobblestones to flat grey pavement as they walked along it. Eventually Phoebe found a dirt path leading down into a little wooded dell, and she turned down it without a qualm. Andrea followed behind her, her footsteps soft and shuffling in the deepening twilight. In Phoebe’s head she repeated the names of the herbs she’d learned about, well over a year ago, that might help in this situation. *Angelica, tansy, pennyroyal, black cohosh...*

She had memorized them then, and refreshed her memory every now and then as the world grew a little stranger every day. She liked their botanical names, their lines, their chemical compositions, just as she did with mint, rosemary, and chamomile; but she hadn’t needed those plants the way she felt she needed these. She kept her eyes open for the bunched sunspots of tansy, the feathered angelica leaves, the spiky purple clusters of flowers that marked the pennyroyal from the alyssums. She knew they were here, they had been planted with several other herbs as part of a huge “wild” garden some years back.

“We’re nearly there,” she said, and Andrea breathed back, “Finally.” Night was falling completely around them, and Phoebe flicked on the flashlight, to see the plants and the path better. The garden was framed with a pair of poorly-tended topiary bushes, and Phoebe could see that the garden was all overgrown and uncut. *Angelica, tansy, pennyroyal, black cohosh*. Some of them had to have survived, crowded out some other plant.

“Creepy,” Andrea said as they stepped onto a cobblestone path that ran around the garden. There were little statues everywhere, overcome with plants—*datura, bindweed, hollyhocks, foxglove*. “What are we looking for?”

“Spiky purple flowers, growing on stalks,” Phoebe said. “Or bunches of little yellow flowers that look like felted dandelions.”

Andrea, in the poor light, didn’t seem especially impressed, but she dutifully looked around, squinting into the flashlight’s beam and the weak moonlight filtering through the ash trees that ringed the garden. Phoebe adjusted the waist of the skirt—it was beginning to feel tight again—and pushed through some knee-high rosemary to a bed where she had been sure some pennyroyal had been planted. There were plenty of flowering plants, including the rosemary itself, but none with the round leaves and spiked flowers she was looking for. The only white flowers were alyssum, not angelica; the only yellow flowers some sort of marigold, not the tightly petaled heads of tansy. She straightened up from her bent-over posture and cursed.

“I’m not seeing anything,” Andrea said.

“I don’t think they’re here,” Phoebe said. “Maybe they got crowded out, or maybe they got torn out.”

“Okay,” Andrea said. She had been kneeling in the dirt; now she stood up and brushed dry soil off her hands. “Okay. Can we find these at a nursery?”

“Not likely,” Phoebe said. She rubbed her stomach, and adjusted the waist of the skirt again. “These herbs can be toxic. The usual chain store isn’t going to have them, and I think most individual nurseries are closed by now.” She glanced around, her insides shaking. “Maybe foxglove. Foxglove might work.”

“Whoa there,” Andrea said. “I know about *that*. You are not taking that—”

“What other choice is there?” Phoebe spat. “It’s getting bigger, Andy, and I don’t want—I don’t want—”

Andrea’s arms came around her and held her tight. “Shh,” she said. “Shhh.” Phoebe shook, the light from the flashlight swinging wildly over a clump of hollyhocks, through the beginnings of a grapevine climbing one of the ash trees. Andrea held her as she had held Andrea, when they were girls and Andrea had fallen off her bike for the fifth time, scraping her knees and her hands bloody. Phoebe had rocked her then; Andrea rocked her now.

“Right, okay.” Andrea stepped back. “Okay. There’s got to be something else we can do besides outright poison you, Phoebe.”

“Right,” Phoebe said. She could feel herself teetering on that tightrope. Maybe she would give birth in the next week, the next day, the next hour. Maybe it would let her live. Maybe it wouldn’t. Maybe she’d be Mother Mary Queen of Heaven all over again. She clutched at her sister’s arms and swayed, the pendulum moving. She tilted her head back and stared up at the stars. They were few compared to the clear skies of the country, but the brightest could still be seen. The distant rush of traffic sounded like the surf of the bay, and she knew if she closed her eyes she could pretend. She didn’t close her eyes, but listened. Only the traffic surf and the distant honking of geese distilled the silence, and Andrea’s quiet breaths. The night settled around them, warm sliding down into cool.

“I know what I want to do,” she said. She stepped away from Andrea and handed her the flashlight. “I’ve got my phone. If I need you, I’ll call.”

Andrea said “Phoebe,” but her voice fell away, soft and lost in the dark. “What are you going to do?”

Phoebe took a deep, shuddering breath. She could feel the thump and pulse of her heart, ratcheted up to throb in her ears. She could feel her blood coursing through her, all parts of her. Her body felt as if it were her own and yet something separate, alien. She was riding inside of it—caged, carried, entombed by bones and flesh, and the choices that others had made for her, and the ones she had made for herself.

“What I want.” She kissed Andrea’s smooth cheek. “Go wait for me at the car.”

“How long? How long are you gonna be?”

“I don’t know.” She squeezed Andrea’s hand around the flashlight. “I’ve got my phone,” she said again, gently. “I’ll come back.”

She slid on the grass—slick, not dew but the last traces of sprinklers—and fell flat, crushing grass beneath her body and streaking her clothes green. She stayed still a long moment, listening. The uphill climb was taking it out of her—her feet ached in her sneakers and her hips ached in their sockets, but she was nearly at the summit of the hill in the center of the park. It was a winding climb on the path, and she’d stumbled more than once, but the moon had cleared the tops of the trees and she could see her way to the top. It wasn’t a mountain, but it was steep enough for what she wanted to try.

At the summit the earth rolled away from her, draped in clover and, further away, the sharp spikes of conifers. The moon loomed over her, gibbous, and Phoebe turned her face away

from it. In the shadows things lost their shapes, their definition, bled into each other. She looked up and found Polaris—pole star, which had once been Vega, and would be Vega once again, long millennia after her bones had disintegrated into the earth.

Her stomach had rounded out, pushed at her shirt, a little half-moon belly growing like a tumor. Her one comfort was that whatever it was—and there were stories, weren't there, about eggs and birds and mermaid-children—it was expanding, but silent and still, waiting out its human mother's timeline. She felt the pull of the pendulum again, sharp—why couldn't she have had some grotesque accelerated pregnancy and have been done with it in a day? But she wasn't a goddess, to so control her own body.

She rocked on her heels. Perhaps there were gods who listened to the likes of her, divine incubators, but she had never heard of one that was—only virgins and victims and queens too powerful to insult. Phoebe stood where she was, and felt her mortal flesh around her, entirely too solid and full of secret betrayals. Her blood thrummed and settled, her heart began to slow to a less reckless pace. Around her were shadows and shapeless bushes, rustles from birds and mice in the shrubs, and the cold moonlight falling over her hands. Below her stretched the shadows of the park, stitched with light patches, and beyond them the lights of the city. She took a deep breath, and hoped the hill was as steep as she remembered, and leapt forward, the pendulum swinging at the farthest edge of its arc.

When she hit the ground, she had the sweet taste of her own choice in her mouth.

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