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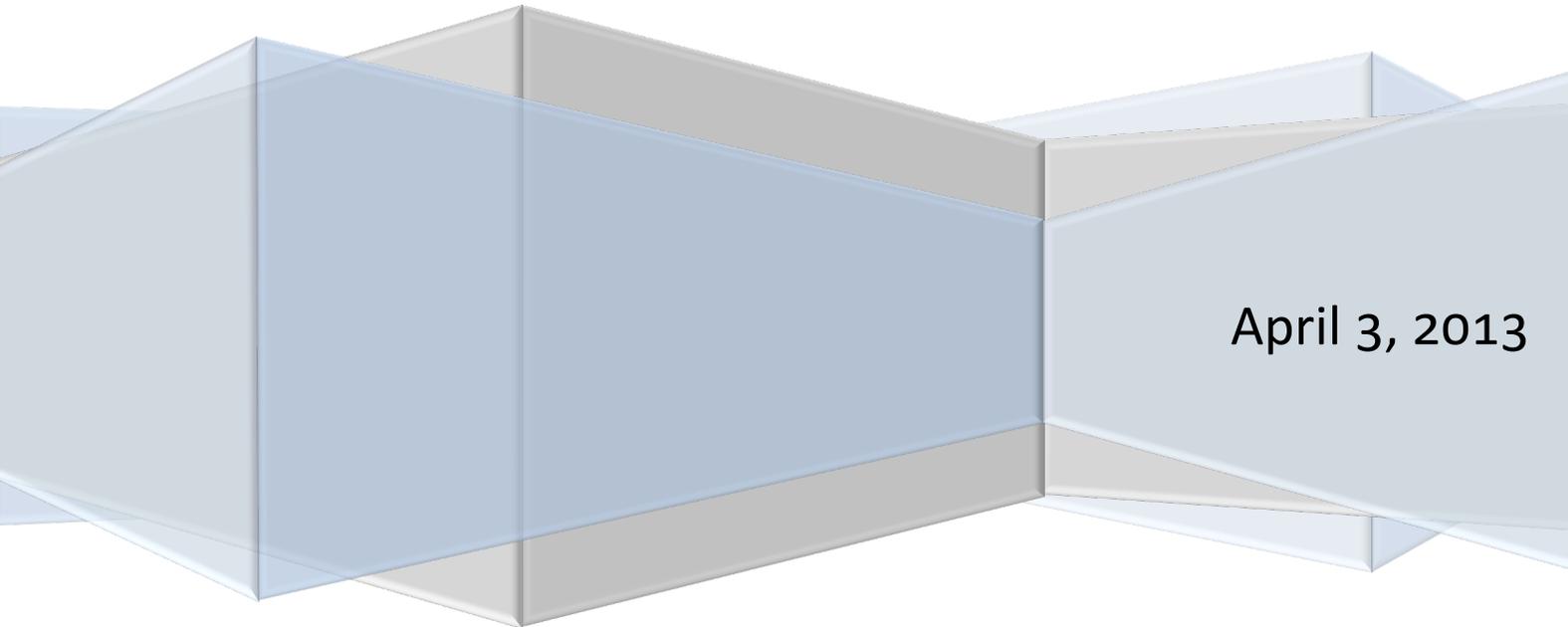
The Resurrectionist

[A Creative Writing Undergraduate Honors
Thesis Project by Lydia Green]

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Abstract

To what degree is love genetically determined? Is it there, some magical golden dust, resting between the coils of strands in every living cell of our bodies? Is it already known by the fates before we're ever born? Or is it merely a possibility triggered by a series of chaotic dominoes, a roll of the dice made right by only one correct lifetime, never to be replicated?

The year is 2163 and Cassius Burke, a genetic engineer leading an elite team of cloning scientists known as the Replicists, has learned his wife Jessica has died. She, and millions of other women, was drafted as a soldier in the Chinese-American war and never came home. All Burke has left is her locket—and the hope that his knowledge of cloning can resurrect his beloved Jessica. Cloning, of course, has its drawbacks. First and foremost, the clone arrives as a squalling and vulnerable infant that Burke must not only hide from the prying eyes of everyone in the United Corporate States of America and the enforcer known as the Overseer, but also raise to take the place of lover. This science fiction story in the vein of *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* follows multiple points of view as Burke descends into *Lolita*-esque madness and baby J. grows into awareness finding a world more like a prison, unable to leave Burke's apartment for fear of being discovered by hyper-intelligent cameras. How long can Burke keep his biggest secret and just what does the UCSA want to keep people from finding outside the city walls?

I wrote *The Resurrectionist* to address the dual ideas of cloning and corporate personhood, wrestling them into the speculative what-if that asks uncomfortable questions that may not be far in our own future. With recent Supreme Court rulings designating businesses as persons and committees so big they require the word "super," people already allow corporations to vote with their money. Television shows document people cloning their pets for huge sums of money on the off-chance that DNA can determine love. It isn't such a farfetched idea that

corporations might soon become the government and lovers could wish to clone the dead. As an author, it is my job to be nosy and I couldn't resist finding out what would happen if someone tried. My characters, it turns out, had a lot to tell me.

Science fiction can often seem cold and detached, mirroring faceless overlord governments and the robotic technologies of the day. However, I take the story in an emotional and human direction because it is told from the perspectives of each of the main characters in turn. Each of their experiences—the replicist, the replicate, and the original—are important and so tightly knotted to each other as to be inextricable. Thus, the narrative is organized in sections headed by the name of the character speaking in first person. Often, memories intrude informing setting, character history, and action. This story draws from genres of science fiction, survival, and a twisted sense of romance. Women's issues and technology tint my story's world but I want the focus to be on human lives making human choices.

The focus of this story is on a microcosm of one man's obsession and the disastrous results that engineering human lives can have. But aren't the stories of the war and of the complacent masses important, even if they're implausible? I would argue that, while interesting, these stories have been told before because they've already happened. The collective denial of the German people and governments during and following the Second World War are both an inspiration to my story and proof millions of dehumanized lives could be taken without an outcry. Knowledge of the past is useful, if it saves the future. But Burke did more than study the past; he brought it back to life.

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Prologue

It is an uncomfortable feeling when loves past invade the present. Because they're out there. They wait to be remembered when you brush by them on street corners. Just when you think you're forgetting, they're the blur caught in train windows. They're the sensation of uplift from just a glimpse. *Was that—?* The feeling flits through the crowd like a moth, alighting on a pair of eyes or a lock of hair only to dissolve at the mind's probing chase. And then, sometimes, those pasts are right there in front of you, crawling up under your skin where you can't dig them out, where you can't forget—not ever.

Burke, 2163

In my world, there is no sunlight. There are only halogen simulations. There is no individuality and no kindness to be salvaged from stainless steel surfaces and absolute truths. Her name was Jessica and she was the one glimmer of beauty, truth, and compassion left in a world full of identical jumpsuits and puppets on telescreens.

There is no light but there is Jessica. There *was*. In my world, there is no empathy, only devotion to corporations that pass for government and the far-off wars they fight. In my world there was only Jessica. There was, and there can be again.

In a world like this, a man can hardly hear himself breathe over the roar of the hoverships, the bustle of the trains. When the world doesn't have much else to offer, a man like me can lose himself in his work—engineering bodies the way they used to manufacture cars on the assembly line. She was my tether to both enchantment and sanity, the keeper of my salvation and my damnation, and she was stolen away. A necessary and meaningful sacrifice, or so the sales pitch went. Without her I was drifting, left to endure the coming storm alone.

#

The morning after I found out Jessica was dead, I went on a walk. It was one of those achingly lovely winter mornings where no one else seemed to see any reason to go outside. Ice frosted barren trees and the air was so cold it burned with each breath like the winter was trying to become me. I wasn't far from wanting to become the winter, either. It was a morning where, as I walked down a deserted lane long abandoned by the last cars, my hand instinctively clutched at frozen nothingness. Her hand, of course, was not there.

Fog snaked around the feet of skyscrapers where mountains once stood and the dirty city was obscured by white. It was a scene almost beautiful enough to make me forget that I wanted nothing more than to share it with her. But the chain of the locket tightened around my neck and I couldn't forget as I doubled over in the center of the road. Overcome, for a second, with the realization that I'd never see her again. With the practiced concentration of the grieving forcing back memories, I regained my breath and my sanity by counting the thrums of my pulse which I felt out to my fingertips. *One, two.* The bounding of a deer, the reverberation of a string.

At last, the chain loosened from my sticky neck until it was just a regular locket. The simple gold sphere inlaid with her initials slid into my palm as it has so many times before; warm to the touch and containing the most precious thing left to me in this god-forsaken hive—a second chance.

The locket, innocuous once more, returned to its place against my chest beneath the artificial material of my jumpsuit. Somehow, I straightened and continued my walk. The world was so still; without even a hovership to break the silence, I might as well have been the only one alive.

#

Time after that is blurry. The early days are obscured, as if smudged in ink or crossed out when I try and look back on them, but I know how they must have gone. Every day is the same now. Waking from sleep has always been an assault to my senses—the simulator overhead flares bright to activate light receptors in the brain and a slick metallic whirring sound, like the burrowing of insects (proven psychologically effective), fills the room to wake us at the right time. But now, a jolt of pain and the flood of memories join the moment of my awakening. The draft. The final fight about making a run for it. The slam of a door. The talking heads on the telescreen tell us all that everything is going to be okay, that our women are doing a great service for our country and will be home soon. Lies.

I shake the blackened thoughts from my head and try to make the proper motions. Make coffee, watch the news. The human mind is resilient. Already she is fading and the pain becomes duller. Her scent escapes from the clothes that still hang in our closet.

Losing her was impossibility, so for months I have to remind myself she is really gone. I can't escape her. She is still in the apartment, in the toothbrush on the counter or the pair of pants shucked on the floor. Eventually I return to work. There are only so many sick days a genetic engineer can take off before the State begins to wonder. But she follows me out of the house, too. She is a face in the crowd, glimpsed just briefly enough to send expectation zinging through my veins before realization hits—the wrong eyes or the wrong nose. She is a whiff of perfume on the train, a restaurant passed in the corridor. It is enough to make me want to turn around for home, arrests be damned.

But if I hadn't returned to work, the idea—the solution—never would have come to me.

#

This is how they said the war that killed Jessica began: we were blindsided by China, our former allies, in a national tragedy that both obliterated American coasts and brought our people together. I know at least that part of the story isn't true. Whether through conscious acts of obfuscation or not, human history is being rewritten as we live it. Fifty years ago, we were stupid and getting ever more so. The corporations were only getting richer off our dumb greed and vowed to protect us if we gave them power. The Chinese were getting smarter but poorer; their nuclear arms saved up for a desperate final measure and research programs defunct. How could they not be jealous of our wise companies' success? They begged the State to pay outsourced Chinese labor more and, when pay at the endangerment of profit was refused, threatened retaliation. Oh, the corporations knew it was coming. Despite the overabundance of them, it didn't take a fool for us to realize we were outmanned when the time came. In the beginning, it was televised—the machine of war grinding everybody up—there is no better tool of propaganda than one's own eyes. There weren't enough bodies to man all the lines. Not against the Chinese. The Chinese had man after man to throw. Suicide bombers made of Firsts too—unwanted female children. It was thus that the first draft since the Vietnam Era, now a distant echoing memory, was instated and women were not exempt.

I was. They told me as a State scientist, I was more valuable in the research institute. I tried everything to keep Jessica home. I tried to use the weight of my position but I did not have the funds for the necessary bribe. I tried to get her to run away with me. I had connections but she refused, knowing our relatives would be executed once we went missing. The deployment date loomed over us as I made love to her night after night, clinging to the desperate hope of conceiving. She would be more useful to them pregnant, helping bring the next brave generation

of soldiers. But their propaganda, or perhaps some unknown sterility, won out. She said she wanted to go and so when the day came, she did.

#

Can DNA recreate love?

Of course, it will not be the same. Cannot. Genetics are only part of who someone is. The rest is formed by experiences, moments of laughter, hard times growing up. A single shove—or maybe a kiss?—in the children’s barracks could define someone’s whole life after that. But is it not worth the possibility that her genetic code made her love me just as much as I love her?

#

I am the first one in the lab this morning and it feels precipitous. The locket seems to throb with excitement underneath my lab coat. The room is full of the hum of the fume hoods breathing in the dark like immense beasts. I flip on the lights, sending florescent reflections off each identically sky-blue facet of the room. Colorful liquids bubble in beakers and incubators and freezers line the walls. Our lab’s current project? Cloning. The State needs a legion of ruthless killers ready to fight so we won’t be caught unprepared like last time. It is as I approach my work station surrounded by glass vials clouded with yet unburdened life that the first inkling of the idea comes to me.

The lab is still deserted. Krakov and Jimenez, the colleagues I hand-picked for my specialized team, prefer to come in later so they can watch the morning news at home. They still have loved ones overseas. On the street and in the other labs, we are known as the Replicists. Copy machines for human beings. But we do not only wish to preserve the external image. We want to replicate personality, too. A loyal, mindless drive to kill, for example. That’s where the corporate state stakes its interest. But what about the wish to be held in the night, a desire for

fated connection like two gears sliding into place? There is no reason those can't be built from proteins too.

Alone with my thoughts, I cannot resist researching my notion. The reflective blue tiles that coat every surface of the laboratory are more than sterile work surfaces, measuring devices, and microscope stands. They can think. Computers have long progressed beyond tablets and micro-thin touchscreens. I stand at one of the big glowing wall panels that can become a library at the touch of a fingertip. They are everywhere, in the walls, the ceilings, the buildings themselves. And that is perhaps the danger of them, too. The entire pool of human knowledge—or at least the knowledge owned by the United Corporate States of America—less than a breath away.

Of course, what we read is monitored. A country in precarious times cannot afford distractions and dissenters. Sometimes, the only thing more dangerous than ignorance is awareness. The monitoring program is called the Overseer. It will obstruct your view of the page with a pop-up that asks “This content does not qualify for Corporation interests. Please state your purpose,” and similar such phrases. Moreover, the Overseer scans your facial expression, stress levels, and posture as you respond. If you pass its test, the reading can be continued. If you fail, well, the tramping sound of approaching boots should be an indication.

Today, I pass.

#

Several weeks later, I ride the bullet train home, ignoring the cool female voice which speaks in a constant monotone over the intercom about our citizen duty to spend credits, report suspicious activity, and produce a healthy next generation. I stare out the window. The cityscape gleams at me. White skyscrapers, smooth as the tips of bombshells and silhouetted by the sunset,

rise to tower over hoverships and trains that whiz like insects and snakes at the roots of enormous tress. The “windows” of the train are synthetic simulations, of course. The air is much too polluted with exhaust, steam, and ash that was blown here from the sites of bombings. There is no fighting nearby—the States’ best minds are the most needed weapon we possess and therefore the most well-protected. But I haven’t been outside, truly outside, since right after Jessica died. It isn’t safe.

Evidence of the fighting, of the dying environment and the unbreathable air, is sealed behind airlocks and news pundits’ lips. News from outside the capital city known as the Center rarely makes its way to us either, and when it does, it’s in fragments etched in bathroom stalls and overheard in lunch lines. This is also to protect us. Our troops will be home soon. The Chinese are losing. Outside, it is beginning to rain. All of these things are true and none of them are. It doesn’t matter; I am going to get Jessica back.

My apartment is the same climate-controlled seventy-two degrees it always is but tonight it feels cooler. A low ceiling gives the impression that I live underground, though I know I am really nearly a mile in the air. Equipped for two occupants, the bed and the closet space are each precisely 1.7 times larger than the single. Whether it is an accounting error or to maintain my cooperation, I have not yet been relocated despite Jessica’s absence. I enter the tiny living space that doubles as a dining room and kitchenette and turn on the only light switch, illuminating the utilitarian living space. There is a chair I never use in one corner, a telescreen covered with a thin layer of dust in the other. I’ve destroyed the photos, sold the knickknacks, and I don’t miss them. Not really. A vase of dead flowers sits untouched between science papers and textbooks on the small bookshelf built into the wall. The buzz of the light joins the only other sound: the rattling of the heating duct overhead.

What I've read has me thinking. I do it every day, so why not with her? I line my shoes up at precise right angles to the wall and move through the room to the kitchen counter. The Spartan fridge, the single place-setting at the table, the toothbrush in the bathroom—all are reminders of what is gone but maybe not irretrievable after all. I was overtaken by the past for so long but now the future's just upon me and it's all I can do not to stumble on it.

As if without my control, my hand reaches to my neck. Shut away between the miniature doors of my locket is a single perfect hair, a strand with a wonderful follicle that for me is the key to a universe. My face still wears the impassive mask of the public but, if I were being watched, the shake of my fingers would be impossible to confuse. With all of the breathless care in the world, I withdraw a tiny glass vial from my jumpsuit and place the black strand dangling my salvation inside it. The filament is nothing but a string of amino acids, elements forged by super novae billions of years ago turned into ringlets of keratin that once smelled of peaches, yet it is everything. It winks in the fluorescent light like gossamer stardust.

Could it be possible?

#

J.(for she is not Jesica, not yet) is conceived swirling in clouded liquid beneath the tender gaze of a microscope. Usually, I do not sigh in awe or even hold my breath as the needle pierces the emptied egg and releases its contents. Strands of nucleotides mix with my own special cocktail of genes that hasten the speed of development. I have done this hundreds, thousands of times. It just isn't special anymore. Anyone can make a baby.

But this time is different. This could become her. No one appreciates the poetry in much of anything anymore. No one except for me. We aren't allowed to write anything for pleasure—they have hired propaganda writers for that now. We aren't allowed to read old literature either. I

memorized all I could of what wasn't destroyed before the official decrees. I'm glad I did. The physical copies are all destroyed by now. But they haven't figured out a way to keep beautiful phrases out of my head, not yet. So I think of them while I work:

The soft and gentle union of two cells, round and shining like the moon, like two hearts merging into one.

The cell divides once, twice. Life begins. I am reminded, again, of poetry as something goes zinging through my body and discharges from my fingertips like static electricity. I think it is hope.

I have to run tests insuring the genetic composition when Krakov's back is turned, but the rest is easy enough. As it is, the State has my department working on similar projects. A single test tube exchanged for another, the suction of a needle, and the thrill of victory as J. is planted between a State-owned surrogate's legs as unceremoniously as one stuffs a raw chicken.

It's done.

#

I don't think I ever loved her more than I did as she set the package in my lap. It was wrapped in cream-colored parchment and it signaled she would follow me anywhere. Where she found such quality unsalvaged paper, I'll never know; but her resourcefulness was just one of the wonderful mysteries about her. The night before, we'd never fought so viciously and I thought for sure she'd messaged me to come to her parents' house to end things. I'd told her nothing she said could stop me from moving to the city to take a job among the country's best young human engineers and braced myself for our parting. But instead, she chose me.

I unwrapped the present which was tied with a ribbon made from what I was pretty sure used to be one of her old school gala dresses. Like holding on to the paper, repurposing the dress

was also resourceful of her; she'd never have occasion to wear one ever again. Inside the package was a leather-bound album and it was full of every memory of us ever snatched by a camera's greedy eye. It was both a token of love and a mausoleum of our pasts sealed in ink. We moved to the center a few days later with graveyards in our boxes.

#

The incubation period is, so far, excruciating. I am sure something in my face will betray me at every turn. Even with the added developmental retroviral vectors, I must wait for months. Now, it is to my benefit that I've never made any friends who might be attentive and concerned about my strange behavior. There is no one left in this world close enough to me to know the glaze of sweat on my forehead is not from concentration. I've begun to collect small things: soundproof plates of plastic, rubber tubes, an air circulator.

My actions are treason: using resources that should have been allocated towards another soldier, resurrecting the dead when I should be contributing to the next generation with a new partner. As if to justify them, I work even harder at the lab. The latest snag of our project is the increased occurrence of premature labor in the surrogates. They are stressed (convicted treasonists picked up from the streets and the other dregs circling society's drain) and this influences the length of gestation and the quality of the offspring no matter how much we sedate them. This trend is troubling, as I have J. to worry about as well. Could I handle losing her twice?

I stumble upon the solution by chance. One of the nurses insists on working only while listening to the USCA's reproductions of Mozart. The sound of the radio bleeds from her office into my lab: another daily distraction. Her whims are entertained because she is carrying the baby of one of the most brilliant neuro-engineers the UCSA has ever known and the infant is

projected to be just as mentally impressive. She doesn't drop until well into the fortieth week. I get to thinking maybe this nurse has it right. Coupling corporate music proven to activate the brain the way strings once did and progesterone therapy is just the breakthrough we need.

The supervisors have noticed and are pleased. I have extra meat credits in my account when I visit the cafeteria. My experiment proposals are approved. No one asks me to visit the psychologist anymore.

#

Marriage was an outdated practice by 2145, but we did it anyway. The romantic idea of vows appealed to me. The tragic, joyful nature of pledging one's entire life and purpose to another person even while society itself threatens to crumble under the weight of its own debt. The ceremony was held in our living room which was hastily decorated with coffee filters folded to look like flowers and Christmas tree lights strung over the ceiling like a canopy. It was attended by Jessica's mother, a waifish woman whose sunken, dark eyes betrayed an unfathomable sadness even at this joyous occasion. My father was also supposed to come, but we later heard about a surprise inspection on the train that found him in possession of a Bible and a bottle of champagne. An indelible mark on an otherwise perfect day.

Something about having Jessica's mother read us ancient promises and making vows to each other made our relationship feel more real and permanent.

"I promise to love you through happiness and sorrow. To love you with all I have to give, and all I know how—completely and forever," Jessica vowed to me.

"Until all of time has passed, I promise my heart to your cause." I reached for her hand and, to her gleeful surprise, slid home a ring. I hadn't told her about that part of the plan. It was made of nickel, once belonging to someone's great grandmother, and it had cost me more than a

few favors. The expression of delight that lit her face as she leapt at me was more than repayment.

Her mouth on mine tasted as it always did, of blackberries and vanilla. We were tied to each other then; our fates and happinesses forever were entwined.

#

If anyone notices that I visit the walkway overlooking the surrogates' rooms more often, it passes without comment. Soundproof panes of glass separate me from the hallway of solitary cells that stretch out into the bowels of Corp. State Research Facilities. Every surrogate has its own temperature-controlled gestation room, lit twelve hours a day in a spotlight set at a wavelength designed to mimic concentrated natural sun, delivering the apportioned dosage of Vitamin D.

It could be my imagination but despite the soundproof glass, I hear the strains of a string quartet filtering through the corridor. Their serene white faces all look so peaceful below me; seeing my therapy in action calms the shuffling of files in my head.

They are all confined to bed in varying states of sedation based on their behavior; their cargo is too precious and their ability to hurt themselves (purposeful or not) is too risky. Legs are spread in stirrups and the mounds of their bellies rise unnaturally like hills under the greenness of their paper gowns. Food and waste enter and exit in monitored tubes and wires that spread around each one like the web of a spider. Input, output. Brainwaves. Heartbeat. Fetal condition. Much like the rest of the country, everything in here is recorded. And I am going to try to wipe one entirely from the record.

#

The summer before the Chinese-American War, before the draft, we found a blackberry patch behind Jessica's parents' house. We struggled up the hill, giggling and giddy with the news I had a job placement. "Are we gonna move to the city?" she asked, hiking up one of her floral skirts to reveal men's work boots as she crested the muddy slope below the thicket of bushes.

"Yes," I told her, pushing a branch aside to let her past me. "In the employee dormitory towers, I expect."

"And I get to decorate?" A kink of hair sprung free from the rest and bounced with the excited bob of her head. She was still innocent to the enforced conformity and the regulation-everything we would soon find in the city. I couldn't bear to inform her of reality. Not yet.

"Sure." I grinned. "Let's eat."

The brambles clawed our skin which was tanned and hot in the summer sun, but we didn't care.

Berries burst between our teeth, so fresh and sweet it almost stung. We ate until our bellies strained with fullness and I thought I would be sick.

The juice of the berries stained our lips and our teeth like dark paint, like blood.

#

Every day this week, I have slowly stolen diapers, formula, and sterile grey jumpsuits that are smaller versions of my own. These items are not kept track of, I'm sure. That's the nature of a lab-turned-baby farm. Things get shit on and thrown out faster than new ones can be delivered. If there is one thing we have perfected from the moment of birth, it is consumption.

Food and a place to sleep, what else does a baby really need? I am reluctant to ask anyone who works more closely with the clones and I've never been around children. My image of authoritarian lead geneticist is not one that would hold up well if my true lack of

developmental knowledge was revealed. Finally I have to admit I'm in over my head: nothing more than a little boy playing dress-up in a lab coat, overconfident from his studying.

—no, this fatalistic thinking won't get me anywhere, won't get me back to *her*. My brain, which is more suited to attractive turns of phrase than chemical formulas, is certainly up to the task of reconstructing a mind I once knew so well, isn't it? After all, how alike a well-turned phrase and a line of code can be. Stanzas and double helixes twine around each other in my head. Can't the genetic formula of a lover catch the breath just as long as a perfectly-executed tale of romance? They're each similarly beautiful.

I always thought Jesica and I would tackle parenthood together: the next big adventure. The night of our wedding, we stretched out under those coffee filter flowers and nothing has ever felt more real than her cool fingertips tracing little hands in my palm and saying, "This is where she'll hold your hand. Our daughter." I swear, I can still taste the electricity of promise in that honeymoon moment, those precious three hundred hours of reprieve before the draft notice came on the screens.

I never could have foreseen this. It's troubling to know I am walking cold into the next six years while J. develops. The Overseer would notice the change in my interests within seconds. As it is, I push my luck with infant nutrition and exercise inquiries. When asked, I point to clone research: it's all for the betterment of the war effort. The Overseer swallows it and I go on.

I wonder if I possess some sort of parenting instinct or if it has been bred out of me due to lack of evolutionary need. Most babies are raised by incubators and computers because even with the accelerated growth genes, few people want to deal with the diapers and the vomit and they don't have to anymore. When I anticipate the tedium of fatherhood now, I feel ill. Maybe

when I see her some archaic urge will kick in; it would be indispensable to me very soon. My locket is empty; all of my hope now lives in the belly of a stranger I would barely even call human.

#

I am there when she is born. I abuse my authority, this time. There are designated birth doctors but everyone stands aside when I enter the cell of the surrogate I chose. My research has made me well-known within the lab, even outside of my department, and these days with reverence comes fear.

“Leave,” I say to the delivery nurses and the small, unremarkable doctor assigned to this case. I am surprised by the authority in my own voice. They leave obediently, eyes showing nothing over their surgical masks. I must know what I am doing as I step between the surrogate’s spread legs.

J’s head is already crowning, crimson behind the milky amniotic sac. With a wondering hand I reach for her, whispering, “Welcome home, Jessica. Welcome back to this Earth. Welcome back to me.”

She falls into my hands, squirming and squalling and soaked in amniotic fluid. Even amongst the gore, I am struck by her loveliness. The shock of black hair, the mottled pink of her skin. Ten fingers and ten toes are the relieved count of my wife’s second chance. I have done it. I’ve resurrected the dead. They will remember me as the man who demoted death from an inevitable truth to a legend used to scare children.

The surrogate’s black eyes bulge in pain and perhaps a flicker of something else as it cranes its head and looks up to where I am, covered in blood and cradling my prize. I force myself to recall the papers I’ve read on surrogate intelligence, how much safer it is to have them

here than on the streets, how much better for J. to be grown in a womb instead of an aquarium and without all the messy attachments of a mother's stifling care. J. gets her life and the surrogate may one day earn freedom. A transaction, for both of them. It takes a second but I turn a knob for sedative and the accusation leaves its eyes and its straining body goes slack in the stirrups.

If her first breathy squeals are any indication, J. needs a dose of tranquilizer as well if we are ever to make it home. My hand shakes then goes steady as I hold the syringe to J.'s tiny foot. A drop of numbing agent gleams at the tip. The needle puckers and then pierces her blotchy red skin but she does not cry.

I turn and work quickly at the nearest screen, inserting security passcodes I memorized over the shoulder of a doctor during another delivery. I must not miss a single digit or the Overseer will appear to confirm my identity. The distant ceiling of the deep chamber echoes our trio of breaths with the hushed return of a flutter of wings in a cathedral. My gloved fingertip leaves a trail of blood but no fingerprint as it slides through pages of documentation. Brainwaves, ultrasounds, and blood work slip by in a blur. All normal as far as I can tell, but checking sets my mind at ease. In the end it is left to the discretion of the doctor. It is a matter, then, of checking a few boxes ("unsatisfactory condition," "genetic mistake") and smuggling the now-slumbering infant out of the lab instead of to the disposal chamber where other deviations are sent.

No one misses her as I swaddle her tight and slide her under my coat, against my chest. I am lucky she was born now and not during abnormal working hours. I am lucky that no one questions me as I send the surrogate away and nod at the nurses sitting behind their desk. But

love has always been about luck—two people in the right place at the right time—and I take this as a sign that my choice is the right one.

I can't help looking over my shoulder as I exit in a gasp of air through sliding glass to the train corridor. At the sound of my hurried footsteps, the figure in a white coat down at the other end of the bleak hallway turns.

“Burke?” It is Krakov. He always was nosy, damn him.

I am terrified the thundering of my heart will make J. cry.

“Not feeling so good,” I say quickly. “Heading home early.” She stirs against my chest. Her breath is warm but silent.

His greying Nordic features narrow but I turn and continue to the platform before he can question me further.

That is where I went wrong, probably. I was already placing her above my own safety, above what was right. Still, I stand by my actions then for I was delusional with hope. The thought of seeing her face again one day, smiling up at me, was as dangerous and consuming as Icarus's affection for the sun-warmed air.

#

My dormitory building is less like a community than a hive or a nest built in the bowels of a giant hollow tree. Standing at its base and staring straight “up” through a simulated skylight in the train corridor, I cannot make out the top for it is obscured by the mists of distance. A gleaming white pillar more than a mile tall and housing some hundred thousand occupants, it is a monument to the feats of modern architecture and ingenuity.

With J. clutched to my side, I have only the elevator left to brave. It would be gentler to hold her in the open but everywhere is under surveillance. With face-recognition what it is, J.

would be flagged in minutes, if not sooner. All babies born legitimately have their identities and faces registered at the hospital. They're trying to get cameras installed in homes, too, but somehow that is where people finally draw the privacy line. It's only a matter of time, though. When the corporations can finally offer the right bribe to enough voters. Next, it'll be our thoughts. I imagine the Overseer intruding on a memory and shudder.

I join the crowd as it diverts down yet another steely hallway lined with moving posterscreens and into a lift large enough to hold a trailer of cattle. *Not too far from the truth anymore*, I think. Everyone stares blankly ahead. I feel different among them, now. I suppose I have for a while.

No one wants to make eye contact given all the allegiances it could imply. I have the uncanny feeling if my eyes met with any of theirs, I would find no more meaning in them than the artificial ones on the posters anyway.

Once we are all packed in, the doors slide close with a hiss and I feel a rising sensation of panic that always accompanies this leg of my commute. Closed in, we rocket into the air suspended only by a few delicate cables like veins, like marionette strings. Were it not for the occasional pop of the ear and drop of the stomach as the elevator slows to send passengers off, it would feel like we weren't moving at all.

"Three hundred four," the same female voice from the train announces. I weave through a sea of identical crew-cuts and grey bodies. I must look aberrant in my lab coat. I would say I forgot to take it off if anyone were to ask. But they won't. Emerging into the seemingly endless corridor, I make a left. Door upon door lines the passage as it stretches away into oblivion, becoming artificially grey and misty in the distance just like the tip of the skyscraper.

I join yet another line of people heading the same direction, near each other but not together. J. has not so much as stretched in several minutes. I worry that I have given her too much sedative. My pace increases as people in front of me stop at their doors. Soon, there are not many left behind me, either. I have one of the longest walks.

Light bars spaced every six feet blur together into one long white stripe as I begin to jog, clutching the bundle of blankets to my side. The numbers are duplicate backlit screens mounted at eye level. 3101, 3102...My pulse is hammered dull in my ears. 3111. My door. I reach my left palm out and press it to the flat surface of my placard, nearly choking on my breath. The screen is flawlessly smooth and hot to the touch.

It flashes green in recognition and the door swings open. Almost as if she feels it, J. mews and stirs to life.

We're home.

#

Jesica and I went outside every chance we got before she was deployed. Back then, it was thought that time outside boosted morale. It was a short-lived philosophy, though, because conversations were much harder to regulate. We lounged in the grass that wasn't alive. It was green and soft and smelled earthy, but it was a simulation. The teal sky and reddish sun might as well have been artificial too, but the realness of her hand in mine and the sweetness of frosting on our tongues was enough.

She didn't have to wear a jumpsuit, not yet. We still wore citizen clothes. Her wardrobe was full of dresses in loud prints. There was much we couldn't say, but giant flowers and spirals seemed to say it for her just fine. "Have a family with me," I said for the umpteenth time.

She laughed and patted her stomach like she was considering it. There was a mail with a corporate seal waiting in my inbox at home.

#

Surely my actions from there sound foolish, negligent even, so I will avoid many of the tedious details of daily life during that time. I eat rehydrated food packets. I sit through silent train rides. I fertilize and destroy countless more embryos. Before, there was only one person on my mind as I navigated through chemical databases or listened to newscasts. Now, there are not quite two, but definitely more than one.

She is so fragile and the process of cloning is still so little understood that she could yet be taken from me by some lurking defect or mistranslation. This fleeting possibility lends franticness to my love for her and it is a desperate daily commute home to discover if, yes, she still breathes there where she waits for me.

Every day I look at her, waiting for that moment when she will shine through and recognize me. I barely pay attention at work anymore. Why should I when I now have a cause requiring so much more genuine devotion? After more than a few spilled tubes and botched data collections, Jimenez and Krakov decide my age is finally catching up to me (I know this because they assume my hearing is going too). They give me easy tasks and tell me to go home early most days. I am too preoccupied to argue the matter.

I built a soundproof crib from the materials I stole from the lab over the last nine months. It is nestled behind the coats and dresses in the closet and it is there that I leave J. while I am at work. She is mechanically fed and cleaned and in the first weeks, she sleeps a lot as her body grows and stretches almost supernaturally fast. At night I can't put her down; her gravity is so captivating. Constantly, I tell her all about Jessica, about us. I read to her from work manuals and

propaganda distributions and I think *it can't be* but her blue-grey eyes seem almost like they are following the words on the page as I speak them.

#

J.

My first awareness was that of unpleasant sensation. Constant and from every direction inside and outside me. Heat, hunger, I would learn to call them. A deep voice that hummed through my body, which I thought I liked. I could not see, at first. Everything was too bright and it hurt. I focused on exploring my world through sound, smell, touch. Sometimes, all I could feel was smooth, hard and cold. I was scared because I couldn't hear the nice voice, only whirring. At least I could open my eyes because it was dark. Shadowy shapes hung over me like they were watching. I shut my eyes again. Being afraid made me hungry and then something metallic and warm slid into my mouth and down my throat. I did not like the slither trickle of it in my chest. Something else was crawling around my head, sticking to me, beeping and whispering.

I could not quite control my hands but I clawed and pulled, tearing until the things went away and my fingers felt wet. I do not know how much later the voice was back. The relief of warm skin on mine and a smell that was not metal or milk. I enjoyed the tickle of water on my face, my hands. I could see a face distant above me but it would not come into focus, as if perceived through a fog. It was kind but not happy.

After that, there was something soft wrapped around my hands and then I was back in the dark whirring place. And then I couldn't feel anything at all.

#

Burke

J. is crying and nothing I do will make her stop. Her face, once without flaw in its newness now screams with red wounds she scratched herself in the darkness. For all of my soundproofing and elaborate technology to keep her nourished and undetectable, she needs to be out of her crib and in my arms. Despite what the UCSA would prefer, humans are still innately social organisms. Nothing soothes her like the sound of my voice and tonight, even that isn't working. She is red-faced and squirming, this part-familiar part-mystery. And this is hour two of her howling. Everything I have ever learned, every night I ever spent with nothing to hold but my locket has come down to a test of endurance. My sanity pitted against the frustrations of an infant who, by all calculations, should want for nothing in the world. I am beyond the point of rocking, singing and have lowered myself to pleading.

Somewhere through the red, shrieking fog I discern a knock at the front door.

I hush J., kiss her sweaty forehead. Place her in the sterile bassinet. She continues to thrash in her blankets, now silent behind Plexiglas. The hum and hiss of the air circulators takes up the small space of the closet. The knock comes again, more insistent. Was this it? Would I be caught on a technicality?

Panic rises hot in my throat, followed closely by bile. I scan the front room, notice a bottle and kick it under the recliner, and open the door. I'm not sure what I was expecting—officers clad in black or maybe a neighbor come to complain about sleep—but it wasn't this. My last hope and life's work is in diapers in my room and who should stand on my doorstep but Yegor Krakov.

"Burke," he says by way of greeting, his birdlike features severe and unrevealing as ever.

I examine him for a moment and decide if he was here on official business that he would have back-up. “Krakov.” Equally flat, I hope.

“It would be unwise to speak here.” His eyes seem to want to scan the hallway but a muscle in his forehead quivers and he restrains the urge.

Reluctantly, I invite him inside. What other choice do I have?

He gives no indication that he heard J.’s tantrum and calmly takes the only seat in the living room when I offer it. I do not have to prod him long with my silence before he reveals the reason for his visit. “I have reason to suspect you are committing crimes against our country.” Somehow, the even placement of the lines etched on his face make it more perfect instead of less. “There have been certain...shortages recorded during your shifts.”

An odd sort of relief sinks through me. That’s all? The old bastard wouldn’t know treason if it bit him in the ass. “You and Jimenez also work the same shifts,” I point out, thankful I was so careful around the cameras in the supply closets.

He shifts uncomfortably in the chair. “There is still the matter of your lagging work record.”

“I am aware that mistakes have been made, but each one has been corrected before any harm was caused.”

The catch in his nod makes it clear Krakov knows exactly who made which mistakes. “Others might see your corrections as feeble cover-ups. You’re hiding something. Even if you can fool the Overseer, I don’t think your only loyalty is to the Replicists anymore.”

“Do you forget the multitude of breakthroughs I have made in our field? Are you defecting from the team you specifically applied to join?”

“No,” Krakov splutters, looking decidedly regretful. “I mean only that your additional investigation may be of curiosity to others—to me.”

I am full of foolish confidence. I have him now. “Why would you come to my home and attack me with baseless accusations?”

“Your actions seem suspicious. I don’t know whether to report you but I thought I might warn you or—”

“Or what? Kill me in a back corridor yourself?”

A shadow flits on his face like black wings over clouds and he straightens as if his decision is made. “Your conduct...”

“Evidently no grieving man is allowed a fault anymore.” I sting my scornful words with real anguish. “I suppose if you lost Ingrid your work performance would not suffer?” I watch a drop of sweat trail down from his hairline to his collar where it blooms dark on the grey jumpsuit.

I feel a guilty urge to laugh as he indicates he has a pressing appointment and must leave. He rises to his feet. I shake his hand—icy and not like human skin but like he is wearing gloves—feeling more secure in my ability to deceive than I have in some time.

However, my victory is short. The chair rocks back into its place and as Krakov turns, his shoe knocks into a small plastic object and it spins into the center of the room. J.’s bottle, clearly filled with milk. It gleams and sloshes its betrayal beneath florescent inspection. Both of us stare at it for a moment, dumbfounded.

I do not speak as I cross the room and hold the door open. Eyes averted, he exits taking my biggest secret with him. What he will do with it, I do not dare imagine.

#

J.

“Mine.” I am pointing to the bottle he is spending much too long preparing.

With a clatter, it falls into the sink, sloshing foamy white waves across the counter. He turns to look at me, deep brown eyes stretched wide beneath painstaking neat eyebrows. “What did you say?” he asks me, dropping to his knees before me.

“Mine!” I repeat, though the coveted drink is now out of my sight. I do not know why he looks so shocked. There are no voices in my crib so I must make my own.

“Burke,” he says, tapping his trim chest with one long spindly finger and looking excited.

“Buh...” I say, “Ba...” I clench my fists in frustration. I know the word but I cannot force my mouth to obey my command. He shakes his head and it almost makes me cry. Ba, bah, I mouth silently. He returns to my bottle which must be reheated.

He doesn't say anything else and neither do I as we get ready for sleep. I know I must practice before I am so foolish to talk for him the next time. I cannot disappoint him again.

That night, I am dreaming—or maybe it is remembering—and I see a face that isn't his.

#

Burke

I fear my addition of the development gene has had unforeseen effects. *J.* grows without stopping, eats voraciously, learns until the point of exhaustion—mine, not hers. I expected an accelerated growth in terms of weeks or months but every morning I awake beside her that expectation seems more and more foolish. Physically, yes, she seems to be growing about four times the average of an unaltered human. But mentally, I have not yet been able to find an accurate measure of her progress. It is too fast.

It has been a nearly three months, now, since I snatched J. from the very claws that took Jessica from me five years ago. When I began this journey, I expected trials, yes. I did not envision it to be easy to resurrect my Jessica; I know the dangers inherent in the attempt. At every turn, there are more loyal engineers, suspicious citizens, and technology expanding almost as fast as the ideas it hopes to silence.

What I did not anticipate is the emotional toll, the stinking stacks of diapers I must find some way to discard discretely, the lack of sleep. When I look at her now, I see no glimpse of Jessica the woman who tasted of frosting and moved against me in the night. I see a daughter, a trusting baby girl quickly growing into a child; I see J. and J. only. Yes, I recreated a love but not the one I had hoped. She doesn't know the darkness that lives within me, the monster chomping at the bit, waiting for her to be ready to shape and reclaim. And how could she? I am the nearest to a father she will ever know.

It is only a few nights after she spoke for the first time but she has already given names to every object she can find as she walks around the apartment. Yes, walks. This is what I mean about the accelerated development.

“Love you, Ba” she says, reaching for me.

I haven't been able to bear teaching her the word “Dad.”

Her blue eyes are bright, clear and naïve as I remembered. As she holds on to me with small, sticky hands, I try to imagine what life will be like for us in five years, in ten. With every spoonful of food and rocking to sleep, Jessica slips farther from me. The memory of the way she laughed is replaced with J.'s cooing. Thoughts of defiling a creature so innocent, so completely mine both horrify and enthrall me.

In ten years, she might love me. But will I bear to love her?

#

“Drafted? What do you mean, drafted?” I howled.

For a moment, Jessica almost looked like it was me she was afraid of before collapsing to her knees on our floor and sobbing into her hands. “I have to go,” she moaned. “Everyone does. They need the women.”

Murmuring her name, I knelt beside her and wrapped an arm around her delicate shoulders. I regretted every time I had ever cajoled her to move here with me in the first place. This was my fault and it was my government to protect her from, my duty as her husband. “Haven’t you been listening to me? You don’t. I have connections at work.”

She made a scoffing sound and turned away from my arms. “Fuck your connections. A lot of good they did.” Her anger was a righteous one. I’d promised we’d be exempt if we moved.

“Honey...” My hands, I couldn’t think of anything to do with my hands.

“Honey what? Why was my name even on the list?” Now, she stood and began a feline pace, livid and hot. We should have been safer with the protection of my position than we would have been squatting in the countryside. But I wasn’t good enough, cunning enough to borrow us a deal.

“We could still go, you know,” I offered and trailed off upon the searing of her glare.

“How dare you?” she screamed. “You’ve asked a lot of me with your little schemes and plots but don’t you ever, ever ask me to choose your maybes and what ifs over the government’s definitelys ever again.”

#

J.

He showed me where I lived while he was at work back when I was too little to write or read or take care of myself. He says that was almost two years ago, now, and I have grown so fast. The glass box is buried behind the dresses and the shoes with all the tubes twisting around it in the dark. When I look at it, my throat goes tight and I feel sort of like screaming, like I remember being in there alone for hours. Burke tells me this is impossible but he's wrong. If I couldn't remember, why would I dream about it? In my nightmares, my screams echo around the chamber until I am choking on them, until they are so loud it sounds like millions of voices screaming with me.

#

Burke

I believe an alliance is forming against me at work. Krakov has been promoted by men too important to wear lab coats to Senior Lead while I languish as my title's former glory is one-upped. I interrupt a circle including Jimenez and several nurses crowded around him in the surrogate overwalk more than once. If it were not for my crowning achievement in J., my pride would be crippled and my paranoia ignited.

As it is, I think I understand Krakov's plan. If he cannot outsmart me in games of intrigue and surveillance, he will beat me to the top and then fire me for some failing, real or not. Whether his motivation is a question of patriotism, competition, or disloyalty is another matter. Perhaps he intends to insure his own woman's safety with his sterling record. For a gene-engineer to both lead the field in science and in ferretting out the disloyal, it would not be difficult to negotiate an early lift of Ingrid's draft.

If that is his strategy, it is a smart one. I know because it was my plan, too, before I knew.

#

I didn't want to do it but I had to. If the news was anything to believe—and it wasn't but it was all I had—then the fighting was getting more intense and there was no reunion on the horizon for me and Jessica any time soon. I singled out Alabran simply because he was one of those people who was unlucky enough to always look nervous. He checked over his shoulder constantly, wiped his brow just a little too often with the creased sleeve of his lab coat, shifted his eyes to just below your ankles if you talked to him directly. Sometimes, he would disappear for unexplained periods of time. I'd look down at my screen, look back up, and his station beside mine would be empty. Maybe he had a bowel syndrome or was enjoying alone time with a nurse in a supply closet somewhere, but it sent off alarms in my head even if the Overseer let him through.

I'd heard whispers in the hall that management was rewarding people who turned in traitors. Passing their names on higher up the chain. Even the posterscreens on the trains and in the dormitories proclaimed “Don't aid sin, turn it in.”

“You're sure,” said the manager I'd met only a handful of times, taking notes on his clipboard before peering at me through lenses crawling faintly with stock quotes and test results.

“Yes,” I confirmed, nodding, “definitely something off about him. If it checks out, do you think Jessica...”

“Yes, yes, we'll see to the request.” He shook me off with his hand and strode away down the gleaming hallway.

A few hours later, Alabran disappeared and never came back.

Who knows, maybe he was even guilty.

#

J.

I am bored. I have read every leaflet, every brown ancient scrap of news clipping, and every document Burke's tablets will let me have access to—even the boring science ones. I know words like polymerase, sovereign, euthanasia. Even though I have memorized all of the photos in the secret albums Burke hid in the back of the closet, I still like to crawl back there and look at them. I worm between the clothes and the boxes and then fish my hand behind the vent cover in the air duct. My fingers find a worn leather cover and I pull the book into my lap, using one of the palm-sized screens for light. I used to feel a tiny thrill when I flipped to a page and saw her. She looked like me. When I was younger, Burke told me how, in another life, she could have been my mother. When she died, he put her back into me. I've read up on replication, cloning. I guess, in a way, she is my mother. But he meant to bring her back to life, not get a daughter. I wonder what she would say about keeping me in this little room for forever.

It's so unfair. That he wants her not me. That I don't want to be in this featureless cage at all. The tears come hot and silent, as I've learned to be, and I turn and cry them into the hem of a flowery skirt. I don't know how long it is before I am done crying but the pages of the album are damp and Jessica's face—my face—has begun to smear away like dust caught in a breeze.

Outside, I think it is raining. That is a weird word for me, outside. I do not think Burke wanted to teach it to me. I twist it over in my head, swish it across my tongue as the sound of trickling water that is not 4111's shower filters down through the walls. On the news, they say we cannot go outside anymore, not for real. It isn't safe because there is a war. Burke says I can't go to the outside that is still inside, either.

He says the cameras will see me and bad guys, or maybe the Overseer he mentioned, will come for me. But maybe I can go somewhere there aren't cameras. They don't need them where people don't go. I could go outside, where it is raining.

#

Burke

Today, I return home with an ominous feeling as the door clicks shut behind me. The apartment is silent and for a moment, I almost conclude she is gone. But then I notice the telescreen is on and the bedroom door is cracked to reveal a swath of light. J. is developmentally aged eleven, on the verge of womanhood, on the cusp of the fifteen-year-old Jessica I remember so fondly. I am bringing freedom cake home from the cafeteria, Jessica's favorite. She is waiting for me on the bed, just like she always is. False alarm. Her indigo eyes flit up from the screen in her hand as I walk in. The first thing I notice is that she is wearing one of Jessica's dresses.

"Where did you find that?" I ask harshly, finding myself filling with irrational anger that she has pawed through Jessica's things. Violated the closet, no doubt, with the wrong smell. I still haven't found the right shampoo. Jessica's scent in a bottle. Maybe they don't sell it anymore.

"It's mine, isn't it?" she replies, twisting her hips so I can see the way the floral fabric falls pleasingly on her legs. I have to admit she has a point; it might have been hers all along.

Anger vanishing, I sigh and cross the room.

"I brought something for you," I say, collapsing beside her and running my hand down her back. I have been longing to touch her all day.

She tucks her dark hair behind her ears and looks at me with mild curiosity. "Well, let's see it." She has grown so demanding, knowing I am a slave to her every whim because I have to leave her so often.

I hold out the cake, which is somewhat worse for the trip home riding in my coat where she herself had once done nearly three years earlier. She eyes it, distaste crossing her thin, salmon-colored lips.

“Come on, now. You love this.”

She laughs but it is wrong. It is not the beautiful peal of giggles elicited from Jessica when I tickled her in the park. It is a bark, marred by bitterness and isolation.

“I want something else,” she insists.

“Like what?” Dread sinks through me, leaden and cool.

“I want to go somewhere.” She has asked this before, but it is too dangerous. A citizen without a profile? Security cameras would have her pinged in moments. She is safe here, where she is unnoticeable, mine alone.

“You know that isn’t safe.”

“For whom, me or you?” she spits. “You’re so selfish!” Color rises in her usually wan cheeks and, if anything, it makes her less like Jessica than ever.

“I’m sorry. You don’t know what it’s like out there but I can’t lose you again.” I get up and leave the room. The matter is closed.

But she isn’t done. “I’ll leave while you’re not at home.”

Jessica never would have threatened to leave me. The dress, the smell, the laugh. Everything is wrong. If only she would lay quiet and let me look at her and watch Jessica bloom through that lovely DNA. That’s what she is, really. A shell of a seed, holding what I hoped was a flower but what now seems to be nothing but a stale imitation weed. The eyes are right but the look behind them isn’t.

I return to the bedroom, ignoring her as she turns to look at me in surprise. I grab a pillow from the bed, clench it for a moment, and then throw it to the floor. Spread out below me, fear makes J. wide-eyed and exquisite.

Looking at her is like gravity and I cannot ignore the magnetic pull I feel in my belly button. Like a fish on a line, I am drawn in to her as I kneel on either side of her slim hips. I hike up her dress and she looks up at me in question and her expression is so playing at innocence, so Jessica, that I can hardly control the shudder of desire that rolls through me. As I press myself to her, my anger at her mutiny evaporates. "Please," I say, "Please, Jessica, once more...for all I've gone through..." She does not speak, thank God, she does not speak for J.'s voice would shatter the illusion of this moment I am spending half in gauzy memory with Jessica.

I lower my mouth to her neck, breathing the musky scent of dust mingled with woman and girl. Her heart flutters under my palm like a bird thrashing against its cage.

She wants this too, I tell myself. She has already lived one lifetime with me. Her destiny ties her to me, down to her very DNA. She just hasn't discovered it yet. I must remind her now, before she follows her hope for freedom any further. Mine is the first and the last face she can ever know.

I cradle her beneath me and she does not look away. Her searchful eyes are almost black, staring, staring.

All of my doubts, my paranoias, and my parental reluctances are gone. The buzz of the light, the mumble of the telescreen in the other room, all of it fades away as I lose myself in the softness of her skin, her sweet breath trembling against my ear. This time is even more perfect than the last because this time, she is mine and mine alone. She has never known another and never will. She must love me for I am all she has, and she does.

I shudder as I hold her body. It is the brief and manic feeling of satisfaction. A strange and lovely song escapes from her lips and rings into the pitch-black room where past melds with present. Her voice is filled with a black emptiness, so unreachable, so impossible to fill, that I yearn to hold her safe against me as I did when she was an infant. But the petal-soft lips that brush on my hot neck as she shakes below me are not those of a child. It is through a pleasure-dampened fog that I hear her but it still sends a trickle of ice into my heart.

Her sob is almost too quiet to hear.

When it is over, I plant a chaste, fatherly kiss on her forehead and straighten her dress. I promise to bring her something when I return. As I cross the room, she turns and faces the wall. Can DNA recreate love? I close the door behind me.

#

J.

I hate him, I think, curled up and shaking with the unbridled anger I never allowed myself to feel before. I used to feel sorry for him: his pathetic attempts at entertaining me, his crumpled gifts and stuttering promises. I also used to trust him. He kept me safe against so much evil out there, evil that had taken me—no, taken Jessica—away from him once. He said he loved me and, like everything else he ever told me, I believed him. Now, I'm not so sure.

It is clear now how much he has come to believe that he owns me. As a baby, that was fine. I wanted him to own me, too. He was my sole source of comfort and protection, my Ba. But the older I got, the more he tried to force the imprints of Jessica on me. Memories he owned because the other owner was gone. He owned Jessica because she gave herself to him. By the transference of her memories, maybe he thought he could own me again, too. Tonight, he tried and I let him. Or did I give it by choice?

I'm not sure about anything. I try to focus on breathing. I try to focus on the facts. Otherwise I'm going to choke on my tears. The air vent rattles to life and the familiar rise and fall of its hum is a soothing rhythmic breathing. In the darkness, I can almost imagine myself curled in the womb of a giant beast. Listening to the walls, I can hear the pulse of its veins, the thrum of thousands of heartbeats in unison sharing this body. I am not alone.

With this image to comfort me, I grow stronger. My tears dry on my face and it is, of course, his face that I see. I don't know many others. Another uncomfortable feeling comes to me, one I want even less to feel than anger.

I love him, too.

#

Burke

Once more, the sighing of the air ducts fills the lab with a comforting roar. It is late, or maybe it is early, and I am not thinking of clawing nails or mussed sheets. I am thinking of sunshine and kisses that tasted like cake and Mozart. The computer system is still on, logged in under Krakov's higher security clearance.

I go to the screen and pull up Jessica's file, the real one. There are photos of us, from back before her deployment. There was deceit in our hearts and they knew it. How foolish of me not to suspect we were being watched. Us at a park. Us holding hands on the train. She smiles at me in her crisp blue uniform in the customary military portrait. I even get as far as the first line of an old message sent between us—*you are the first and the last I will ever breathe...* before the Overseer's pop-up intrudes.

“How does reading this assist the war effort? Are you considering your country first?”

I try to stare beyond the screen, back to the letter I had privately written Jessica so long ago. How had they found it? We always destroyed our mail after reading it and it destroyed itself if it left Jessica's hand. As if to taunt me, more words scroll across the panel. *Without you, my heart is without cause. I will never be loyal to anything the way I am to you.* These are words from our vows, words we memorized and tore up after the ceremony. There are only two ways these words could have been procured and they are through her torture or, worse, her willing betrayal.

"Well, Burke?" the Overseer asks and the window begins to blink red. I guess what they say is true. You can't get back what is lost.

In the distance comes the sound of boot steps.

#

Clack clack clack clack. I heard the steps in the hall before I was even fully awake and this time, I knew they were not notifying the neighbor about his daughter or coming to retrieve a traitor. No, they were here for me and they were here to tell me Jessica was dead. I had been waiting for them.

Still, I began to cry into her pillow as their approach grew louder. The sound of metal soles on tile ricocheted in my head like gunshots tearing into grey plumes of memory. It was not unexpected but to know it for a fact was much worse than I had imagined. It had been months without correspondence, without mention of her platoon on any of the broadcasts.

The knock came at the door and with it, the rending of any hope buried in my heart. I shuffled from bed to the door as if compelled by forces outside my own. Inside, I felt no strength for much more than breathing.

They did not announce or identify themselves when I opened the door. They wore masks like gleaming shells, iridescent pods smooth and black and perfectly reflective so that, when you looked in to them, your own face was reflected back. It was to remind us they were enforcers of our own conscience. Faceless because they *were* us. And I didn't need to look to know how I appeared: the rounded glasses I wouldn't let them replace with screens, sea green eyes ringed in a hundred sleepless night's black crescents, droopy cheeks smattered with stubble almost long enough to earn me a sanction.

"Cassius Burke," said one of the men behind unfathomable black masks. He held out his hand, dangling a small gold sphere spinning on a long golden strand. They always gave you some sort of personal token as consolation prize, as proof. "She would have wanted you to have this."

In the haze of grief, I barely reacted fast enough to catch it as it dropped from his gloved fingertips. I turned the locket over in my hands. What did I expect? It was cold. The men were already disappearing down the hallway, and I could almost feel the relief of my neighbors who were turning to the empty pillows beside them and thanking God it wasn't them, not this time. *Clack, clack, clack*, and then the men were gone.

#

J.

Burke is all I know. No, that's not true. I know Jesica. I know all of their stories. I've memorized her face, the way her head falls back when she's laughing, how she always crosses her ankles when she knows the camera is on her, how her eyes gleam and her feet relax when she doesn't. I practiced her mannerisms when Burke was gone; repeating them always made him

happy. But that doesn't do me any good, now. I am but a reincarnation. A pale shadow of a past, stronger, freer life.

Flimsy imitation that I am, maybe my genes can still redeem me. I know that Jessica was strong. She joined the military. She left her family in the country and moved here, where lack of regulations would seem a pastel-shaded memory. I know she arrived to find industrial carpets instead of grass, to find these same four hateful grey walls that are the only ones I have ever known. I know that she must have dreamed of and remembered more just like I do. I also know that it's been three hours since Burke didn't come home.

I have been in captivity my whole life and now my captor is gone. I can be strong, too. I have to be; this is my chance.

I tiptoe out of habit—I know now that I was a zoo creature, a specimen meant only to be seen and not heard unless it was to parrot—as I cross the room to the closet and crawl, once again, to my corner by the air vent. It would be so convenient, so easy if I could loosen the screws of the cover and crawl up the airways until I found the gusting, howly freedom of outside. But if I was going to use that escape route, I should have done it years ago. Now, I can barely squeeze my head in to look at the miles of hammered aluminum stretching beyond the little shelf that holds my albums. I try to decide what Jessica would do. Burke always said she was resourceful—like the time they scrambled radio signals to sneak past the guards and send a message. That story might not even be true but it doesn't have to be. I grab the albums and a knapsack from the closet, feeling the first zing of adrenaline go shooting through me. I'm actually doing this. I start rummaging through drawers, shelves, and the sparsely-populated kitchen for anything I could take with me. Memories and shadows alike climb heavy into my bag and jostle there with the foil sustenance packets.

There is only one problem: the cameras. Burke has led me to believe they are hyper intelligent and this is one thing I have no reason to doubt him about. All of the history books I've read only briefly mention them and, of course, history about monitoring told by the monitors can't be trusted. But I've gathered enough of the truth between them and Burke to devise a plan that at least might work. It may be brash to think it, but if they catch me, at least I tried. If ever there was an opportunity to follow through with my earlier threat, this is it. No, I won't wait for Burke's return like the loyal pet I've been for so long.

The cameras confirm someone's identity by mathematical formulas. Some things can't be easily changed: the distance between the eyes, the length of the nose, the scaffolds of the cheekbones. I choose a navy blue scarf from the closet. Silk, I recall the word is. They don't make anything this beautiful to wear anymore, and they tried to burn whatever artifacts they could find. I know this scarf's story, too. It survived in Burke's briefcase—a gift smuggled home on the train. Delicate flowers in black scrawl like tears and curl along the edges under my thumbs. It slithers between my fingers, sleek and cool as I coil it around my head and cover my face. Multiple layers alter the architecture, obscure the angles that make me *me* or, well, her as far as the cameras would be concerned.

When I am finished, my reflection stares back at me, unrecognizable. Like a sock doll or one of those Middle-eastern women in my schoolbooks from a century ago, pasted in there as an example of oppression so we could appreciate how free we are today. I cannot see my eyes beyond the folds of fabric. My small heart-shaped mouth is now a deep, yawning gap where the cloth is looser to allow me to breathe. The high cheekbones that usually make me look much older are now just imperfections in the surface. It will look weird to human passersby but the

camera won't know what to make of me. Non-human features might give it hiccups for a while, and that might buy me time. I hope.

There is nothing left to do. I gather my pack that is optimistically stocked with water and dehydrated food. Wondering how long it will be before the Overseer sends someone to paw through our things, I turn off the lights.

I open the door and immediately want to close it again. A cacophony echoes down the hallway: footsteps, voices, and the slam of a door, mechanical whines and snaps. My whole life I have heard only a few voices: the drone of the announcers on the telescreen (that I can only stand for so long) and the occasional blessing of Burke's low intones. Other than that and the same hums and whirs of the apartment, my life has been that of an ancient religious hermit—lonely and silent—and I can hardly bear the assault that must be daily sounds to everyone else. The sight isn't much better. The hallway stretches so far either way it catches my heart in my throat. I am suddenly and painfully aware of how unprepared I am for this. The walls crawl with swimming lights and moving pictures, garish and multicolored. Dizzying text swirls down one wall and zips away like I'm supposed to chase it to keep reading. I almost want to.

Well, I tell myself, it's either this or a lifetime of nights like the last one. There's only one thought worse than that: the one that he might not be coming back at all. Would I starve or be executed first? With one last look back into the dimness of the apartment (I am already loathe to call it 'home'), I choose a direction and begin to walk as quickly as I can without actually jogging down the well-lit walkway. I have to battle to keep the cacophony of advertisements and florescent light bars from drowning out my thoughts. From Burke's recounts of his days, I can cobble together a few details of the way out. He has to take an elevator down to the ground floor. From there, he walks to a train corridor and then the train takes him wherever he wants to go.

Distantly, there are hovership ports. Sometimes I can hear them go by in the night and they sound like thunder. But I don't think I could go without notice long enough to take the train all the way to one of those. My safest bet is getting to the ground and then finding a vent or maybe a window. I know it isn't a very sure plan but whatever's out there has got to be better than what's in here. I pass the first person in the hall. She grips her arms to her sides a little tighter but stares straight ahead as she walks by me in the opposite direction. The itch prickle of fear skitters up under my collar. I'll take my chances out there.

Door after identical door slides by me and I get the unnerving feeling I'm on a treadmill and haven't moved at all even though the itch heat of sweat is at my skin. The bright EXIT sign couldn't be welcomer but it's so undecorated compared to the garish ads adorning posterscreens along the wall that I almost miss it. I turn, following the faint green arrow, and I hear the telltale clang of the elevator ahead.

It's late at night, which means I'm lucky and there are only a handful of other people waiting in front of the sliding doors. No one turns to look at me, but I can sense them gathering closer together as I reach for the wall and press the down button. Burke was right, though. Like cattle, they wait patiently for orders and seek no confrontation even despite the monstrosity I must seem to them.

The wait is only a few minutes. When the doors slide open to reveal a slightly larger number of people—maybe a dozen, all clad in grey and emotionless at my appearance—I feel the sweat begin to pool around my collar and my breath has made the silk wet and sticky around my mouth. Everything I'm wearing is cloying to me and the air I'm managing to gasp in is hot and thick; it makes my head swim. I try not to gag and instead imagine taking off my shoes and

running my feet through grass. The motion of the lift nauseates me. As it begins to move on our descent, I can feel it falling and then I am falling, too.

#

Burke

I maybe have an hour, if it hasn't already happened, before they put the pieces together. By now, I'm sure they've analyzed ashes in the bottom of the trash incinerator and questioned surrogates. At the Overseer's alert, they'll sweep my apartment and discover my secret. With everything else I've ruined, at least there's some dignity left to save. Footsteps enter the room and I do not throw myself to the ground or hide. No, I am proud and calm as I lower the screen in my hand and turn to face—not the cadre I expected, but a single masked guard who raises a black, gloved hand in signal to wait. What else can I do?

“You're important, Burke.” The voice is mechanical and false, like every other head of the government's hydra. “If you choose to talk, your words could bring this whole corporation to its knees.”

I look around for a syringe, a metal stand, anything but there's nothing within reach to fight him with but my words. “No,” I say, “I have nothing to cripple the UCSA. It was a failure.” A distant thundering begins in my ears. More boots.

The masked man steps closer, reminiscent of an ancient scuba diver with a bubble for a head but sleeker, deadlier. “Oh, but you didn't fail, Burke. She survives. That's cause enough.”

Jesica's name thrashes in my throat, desperate to escape. *She doesn't survive! She didn't come back for me!* “What happened to her? Did she betray me?” I squeeze my eyes shut against the image of this man wading towards me underwater. I don't know which one I'm asking about.

“You’re important, Burke. Don’t waste it,” the mask hisses. When I open my eyes, the black figure is gone and the room’s echoing question is a life raft I throw myself on.

#

J.

“Stupid girl,” a male voice whispers. It sounds like an outrageous old Russian accent from one of Burke’s movies. I am on my back and the world is rocking beneath me with the rhythmic power and slow gentleness of an ocean.

I realize I am in someone’s arms, being carried. My scarf has been loosened around my mouth but otherwise is still in place. Above us, skylights slip by, little windows to the outside, or at least that’s what the UCSA-designated cycle says it is. The man feels me stir and says “Stay quiet, you are safe. We are almost there.”

I nod though I don’t know if the man can see, and I try to crane my neck around the giant bicep in my way. My view is unhelpful. Another empty corridor glowing bright and dancing with cartoonish animations. I look up at the man instead. I see a hooked nose hanging over me like an eagle’s beak. Greying hair but styled in a way that it makes him look distinguished and not feeble. “Krakov,” I declare under my breath. The slight catch in the man’s step tells me I am right. Burke had warned me he might come for me. The coworker with unrevealed motives.

I see no Overseer (who I imagine wearing red and cracking a whip) and no guards. Krakov is here on unofficial business. We take a turn and the nearest sounds of announcements and sliding doors grow distant. “Can you stand?” he finally asks me after we’ve travelled another several minutes, and a smell I recognize from the broken sink Burke never could risk reporting emanates from the pipes overhead.

“Yes.”

The way he lowers me to the ground is nearly tender, and I turn to look at him in surprise. I was expecting some sort of torture. Perhaps I am to be turned in as evidence of Burke's crimes? Exchanged for Krakov's wife? I don't know how that would work.

He raises a meaty hand and points to the wall. "Here," he says.

I almost ask what I am looking for when I notice the outline of bolts and an irregular-shaped sheet of metal that looks haphazardly placed. I get the feeling this wasn't a regulation repair. Someone else has had my idea and tried to cover it up. He hands me a small tool that I deduce is meant for the bolts and begins to walk away before I stop him. "Why are you helping me?"

A chuckle softens his chiseled face and he crouches before me. "Because I realized I'm more like Burke than I thought. I still believe in hope." With a smile, he takes the tool from my hand and slams it into the wall, puncturing metal as if it were flesh.

I peel apart the edges of the metal, widening the opening. It screeches in reluctance. In the distance, the shrill chirp of an alarm pierces the underlying chatter of intercoms and ads. Someone must have heard something. I turn around, wishing to thank my rescuer, invite him with me.

Shaking his head, Krakov says, "Run."

Shimmying through the hole we made, I fall out into the searing brightness and I take in my first gasp of air that wasn't breathed through metal lungs first. It slides cool into my chest like water I didn't even know I was thirsty for. Clear and with it, bringing clarity like I've been breathing and thinking smoke my whole life. I realize the skylights in the corridor were lies. Before me is a sight more beautiful than anything I've ever swallowed up with my eyes. Around

the edge of the wall is barren dirt mixed with yellowed grass that shimmers with sickly heat. But beyond that is paradise.

I drink in the trees lathing the deep azure sky, the golden dust suspended in the air. Everywhere I look, I see endless green caught in the gilded surf of the sun's beams. This must be what the history books named forests.

They said all of this was gone, bombed flat, rebuilt by the generous United Corporate States. But it's all here. Still here or grown back? And to think people live every day on the other side of a concrete wall mere meters away from the sweet air and sunshine, ignorant and obedient without question. I stomp my regulation white slipper, sending up a glittering cloud of dirt, but I do not have time for outrage.

Oxygen hisses as it escapes the pressurized hallway behind me. In the distance, I hear a shout. I'm already airborne.

#

For a moment, it feels like the wind wants to lift me off my feet and carry me away into the sun-warmed sky, but then my slippers hit earth again and I'm skidding into the trees. Every arched leaf, every coiled stem and rough branch seem so sharply etched into reality when I'm used to the graceless corner of pixel edges. I have to touch everything. I kick off my shoes and forget them under a tree while the newborn pads of my fingers and toes explore along the crags of rock and tingle against blades of grass—things the earth made and no one bought. There is no comparison to be made from my world. It's the static discharge the instant before opening a door, the moment of the eye's adjustment when turning on a light in a dark room. Disorienting, intoxicating.

I am reintroduced to the world, a blind person given sight for the first time but more grateful, more terrified. If I close my eyes, it's wonderful too. I notice absence first. The continuous buzzing I hadn't even realized coated my reality in sharp grit is gone from my ears. I was also used to sour air recirculated through miles of ducts and millions of lungs breathing stale odor ads in the city, but here it is thick and clean and dizzying. I think I might choke if I swallow it but I want to drown in it at the same time. It smells like the skirts in the back of the closet, like dirt and tree needles and something that reminds me of the muskiness behind Burke's ear. There's more to experience deeper in the forest, I know. So I keep walking with a purpose now: *live.*

My slippers get left behind.

#

I've been trudging through the trees for what feels like hours, days maybe. I don't know how many times I've crouched and left consciousness still supported on my feet only to awake, disoriented, and continue walking. The endless darkening shapes of tree trunks have lost some of their magic and the ground is grating my tender feet with every labored step. It turns out, spending a lifetime locked indoors isn't too great for the muscle tone. Burke did give me weights to lift and a jump rope; and like every legitimate citizen, I was fed a regulated diet to keep me skinny, but I've got no distance in me to burn. Without the structure of the apartment schedule, Burke's comings and goings, my meals, the glowing digits of my screens, I have no way to tell time. I choose what direction to go on a whim. A good feeling about a tree, a convenient path between two hulking boulders. If I am not mistaken, it is beginning to grow dimmer and I wish I had brought a screen again, at least for the light. I begin to stumble over roots and rocks and, for the first time since the hallway, I'm afraid.

What am I doing out here? I don't have any destination in mind. No one knows or cares that I'm alive and if they did, I'd be dead. My legs are on fire and my feet drag like as if I'm wading through processed cheese substitute. I pick a tree at random and collapse at its base, sending gravel skittering away. Maybe some sleep will give me direction. And sleep, I do. For the first time in my life, the nightmares of faces can't find me.

#

A hand grips my arm and shakes me awake. It is rough and smells a little like pee. I stammer something and lurch to my feet, snatching my backpack to my chest. It's wet. Actually, all of me is damp. My silk cover has fallen around my neck and hangs there in beautiful contradiction to the severe simplicity of my wrinkled jumpsuit and limp hair. It's early morning—yet the light is so faint, no wonder I didn't wake up—and I am not alone. A tall woman stands in front of me, streaked in mud and slicked in sweat that glistens on the cords of her neck as she glares down at me. She's dark-skinned and wielding what looks like a sharpened toothbrush in one hand and a broken glass bottle in the other. “Who are you? What's your name?” she demands and doesn't look like she's going to wait for an answer as she edges closer to me.

I hold up my hands and drop my pack, like in the old Western movies Burke showed me. “I'm J.,” I answer, though even I know it sounds unsure.

“Jay?” the woman repeats and smacks her tongue as if she can taste its oddity. “How old are you, Jay?”

Now that question, I really can't answer. “Uh...three?” I immediately know I've said the wrong thing. She crosses the clearing to me in two strides and takes me under the arm. There's no overt threat of violence as she grunts at me that I'm going with her, so I snatch my pack from

the wet earth and allow myself to be dragged deeper into the woods. Maybe this woman who smells like urine has better food.

She doesn't ask me any more questions, and I don't provide answers as we walk. It must have rained last night because everything underfoot is wet and smells damp as our footsteps sift through the underbrush. I'm disappointed I missed it. Birds twitter, their whistles filtering through the treetops to stroke the velvet insides of my ears. It's a sound so deliciously organic, that simple free gratitude for one more morning, that I'm fighting tears when the woman pulls my arm up short and we stop. This clearing looks the same as the last, until I look closer.

Lurking behind trees, suspicious ruddy faces peek out. There are more people out here? The lanky woman does not remove her hand from my arm as several other women emerge from the undergrowth with smoky eyes and clutching improvised weapons, too. They surge at us in one force. "Was she armed?" one of them asks, barely glancing in my direction like I'm too dumb to acknowledge. Her hair's snagged a few scraps of leaf in the curls.

"No," my escort murmurs, unruffled by the others' heat though they're surging against each other like churning water. "Completely alone, unprepared either."

"You're sure?" another presses. "We can't know it's safe to go in for supplies unless you're sure." I notice how dirty these women all are. It doesn't look like they were much better sheltered than I was last night. There's an urgency, an earnestness in their faces that are a little too drawn to signify a cozy bed anywhere in my near future.

"Trust me. I watched her first, as you asked."

Offended, I open my mouth, "Excu—"

Her dulcet voice butters over my indignation, "I don't think she's a threat and none of you are to hurt her." Something like irony (the glow of a repressed chuckle?) tints her voice. She

must carry some sort of power because the others lower their weapons. The one with leafy hair flares her nostrils and gives her head a hostile toss.

It isn't until then that I notice there are still more of them. We appear to be at the outskirts of some sort of refugee camp. Behind us there are circles of women gathered under trees or huddled beneath blankets. A dozen more, at least. I realize I've been holding my breath

We are guided to the larger of the groups and though my safety's been assured, I still feel like I might be challenged at any moment. As I look around, the faces turn deliberately away from mine, measured in their wariness. But I am drawn in to only one, which, even as I watch, draws farther back into the shade to conceal itself. But it is too late, I know what I saw. The familiar gleam of the indigo eyes that are the exact shade of my own. I know what I saw and I am already running for the trees before her name can escape my lips.

#

Burke

Two pairs of eyes meeting across a cool, corporate classroom. Like gears sliding into the place they were always intended to interlock. It is amazing the kinship that can be shared with a glance. We were fourteen and in love with the sound of each other's voice. We had such youthful gold-washed notions of fairness. I protected her from bullies who teased and tormented her for her non-regulation clothes and her un-corporate accent. She kissed me in the barracks once the lights went out. Our secret. She wanted to change the world.

I was content enough with letting her change me.

#

It wasn't until near the very end that I knew the "deployment" was a lie. I had suspicions all along, but nothing concrete enough to convince head-strong Jessica to run away with me. It

was a slow curl like fear, like a bad smell that you catch only every so often when you turn your head a certain way. It would have been easier to ignore. The first time I caught it, we weren't yet married. My team and I were in the surrogate pre-implantation room checking the latest specimens for chemical and bacterial impurities that might upset the engineered balance of my clone embryos. Jimenez was humming a song low and sad, a lullaby, as he scraped under the yellowed crescent fingernails of a prostrate surrogate.

A hum rose in the surrogate's slender throat. I could feel it beneath my probing gloved fingertips, the thrumming churn of energy just below the surface. Her skin was hot but her eyes stayed closed, serene as her high voice joined Jimenez's low one. Together, they sang a few bars. "Beyond the apple orchard go, where love dusts red the sunlight's glow—" As if waking from a dream, Jimenez straightened, still clutching his file.

"You know this song?" His voice split at the seams with such homesickness.

"Yes," she choked out, beginning to cry. "I knew this song from my home town."

Jimenez clasped her hand tighter, pulling it to his chest like a man scrabbling up from the edge of a cliff. "They took you from Raneros?"

"I was deployed."

I felt my heart stutter with cool realization. I needed to go home and tell Jessica about this. Krakov emptied a syringe in her line before her dangerous humanity could escape further into the room.

It scares me that I let her walk into their arms when I worked with her sisters, her fellow "soldiers," every day. Saw firsthand how dehumanized they were. It scares me even more that she suspected I knew something and she went anyway.

And there I was, the night before my arrest, standing in a warehouse at the very source from which the corporations' power flowed through copied human veins. It was all the proof I would have needed to get Jessica to stay.

#

I try to run. Even though I know it is hopeless and half of me welcomes the punishment I know I deserve, I run. Dodging freezers and racks of test tubes, I crouch and scurry between stations nearly gagging on my panic. The rubber soles of my state-issued shoes squeal against the tile. I launch myself through a door and into a hallway feeling dizzy as if I'm tumbling through air. I shoulder between a pair of lab techs who had their heads bent over a screen—probably has my face plastered on it right about now—and break into a mad stumbling run for the train corridor.

Only one thought consumes my mind: I have to get to J. before they do. Crashing across the bridge of the surrogate overlook, the sheer number of gleaming white, swollen bodies which are growing willing and able soldiers nearly stops me right there. My small rebellion is little more than a tiny seed allowed to sprout just a little too long, but easy to squash nonetheless. In the whole of it, it doesn't really matter what I do. Whether I die easily here or six hours from now clutching J. and a broken towel bar, there are millions more waiting to fill my spot no matter how many of their wives they kill.

I cut down a hallway that heads out of the laboratory sector and towards the platform for the train to the metropolis. My lab coat flaps like a multitude of wings behind me. I can still hear them coming. The tramping tread fills the silence with an ominous beat of war drums. The corridor is gelled with such a stillness I must slog through it. I'm not sure if anyone but me is even breathing. Few of the witnesses, colleagues I have worked with for years, even turn to look

at me when I pass. Their sterile grey faces are intent on the figures and controls tattooed out on the glass at their fingertips. Not that I expect anyone stepping out and coming to my aid, of course. They don't care if I live or die. No one ever did but Jessica, and by the end I'm not even sure she'd have given me that much.

I will never be loyal to anything the way I am to you. She lied. But how could she have known what was coming? I sure didn't tell her. What is love anyway but a series of lies we tell ourselves to keep the madness from creeping in through our ears at night? It doesn't matter though, because as soon as you quit reminding yourself to lie, there's suddenly a lot of room for the whispers and doubts. And then the betrayal comes in, leaping from one to another faster than you can turn and run to save yourself.

Why do we do the things we do for love? What selfish reason possessed me into believing my desire for Jessica should be enough to justify forcing J. back into this loveless world when she had found peace? She wasn't a recreation of love because even the end of that first love was an imitation of itself in the calm just before fallout.

Just as an animal tears at its own limbs to free itself from the metal jaws of a trap, I flay away the tender parts of myself that are still snared by her memory. She chose the military, not me. She did not enjoy our life together like I had planned and hoped. Ours was a sullen and strained marriage and she went willingly, happily, even, when they called her to. The woman I wanted to bring back to life died long before that locket ever landed in my shaking hand. My face sears as tears slicken down my face, and I want to take it all back. Desperate or not, something of my instinct for a good story doesn't let me lie down and wait for the end. If not for myself, I push on for J., the one I made and broke with the folly of a man playing God. So I dash

between the closing sliding glass and duck into a seat, hiding my face in my hands like I am not a wanted man.

The train hurtles away from the platform and I feel the briefest lifting spirit of relief. The cameras have lost my face. I am grateful, for once, for the population spike. Staring at my feet, I realize the floor is not its usual pristine white. It is littered with thousands of little yellow slips of paper—another anomaly since trees have been gone for years. I squint to read the small typed print which seems to be different on every fluttering scrap: *Bring them back. Dead is not gone. Goodbye is not forever.*

Before I can make sense of it, the train gives a horrible, screeching lurch.

I don't know what I expected. Of course they control the computer system as well. The female voice comes over the intercom, pouring over us like calm cool sedative, "Please stand by. Deviant on board. Remain calm." The approaching boots are thunderous. I'm done running.

They'll march me through the crowd. I had hoped my arrest would be a public one. They haven't had a good example in a while. I can hear them—the passengers surrounded by sacrilegious litter—whispering about me, though no one individual's mouth can be seen moving as they close around me. Their voices susurrate in waves like the cicadas used to do in the trees. At first I think it is my damnation they hiss for until they converge on a single phrase: "Show us how."

My mind spins the threads of messages together. My shadowy interviewer in the lab. *You're important.* These people all know who I am. Even as I am yanked from the car and dragged down a passageway towards darkness, I am figuring it out. The hushed meetings led by Krakov. This is what he'd done with what he found out on his visit so long ago. All of the missing women and my secret solution. He wanted it too. Maybe he's already done it.

I wish I could tell them what I already know. That I haven't removed evil from the world but introduced more of it. I wish I could tell them they should avoid bumping into pasts on the street. That what is kept in memory is better. It is better to love them right once, however short, than to replicate them and love them wrong twice, even for the chance of forever.

The masked guards lead me away from the crowd until the voices are a distant, almost imagined memory obscured by the striking of their heels. Beneath my jumpsuit, I find Jessica's locket and I utter a promise as we near the waiting doors of a hovership whose destination is my retribution. It might even be a prayer. I'll never tell anyone how to do it. I'll give up everything when the State interrogates me so no one is ever resurrected again.

As I look up at that simulated skylight for the last time, the night sky doesn't seem so tormentingly obscured. In fact, I can almost see the stars.

#

J.

My companion catches my arm with a russet hand and holds me to the earth with a strange expression of sorrow on her face even as I am laughing in what must seem mad exaltation. Jessica is alive. As we approach, women slink from the undergrowth as one. All of them wear motley combinations of torn jumpsuits and outdated clothes like the ones hanging in Burke's closet.

They gather around me in unison, not entirely threatening, though curious as I sink back into my scarf, exhilaration silenced. But I have eyes for only one. And she for me. Her feet swish through the dewy grass with an assuredness that entrances and terrifies me. I'm not sure now if I want to run towards her or away. Her very existence is a toppling of worlds that leads down to the fact that I shouldn't exist. The very reason for my creation is void.

“What is the meaning of this?” Jessica says to my escort. Comfortable, familiar; her voice is frosting warmed so the oil and the sugar just begin to pull apart and slide against each other.

“Found her in the clearing snoring the birds from the tress,” the woman beside me answers, tucking hair behind her ears that I now notice is braided in black ropes mixed with pink threads. “Thought you should see her for yourself. She calls herself Jay.” The woman, who I realize is my guard, pulls me out from behind her shoulder where I had shrunk. With her ammonia-scented hands, she removes my scarf roughly but not with malice. The blue scrap flutters to our feet and I know Jessica recognizes it. “She says she’s three,” the woman explains. “It has to be her.”

The scrutiny of the other women is unbearable, like fluorescent bulbs and cameras but worse because Jessica is one of them. I’ve spent so long staring at her face in photo albums and stories conjured by Burke, but the face narrowed in assessment of me is foreign somehow. Older, of course. Train tracks crisscross the corners of her mouth which is set in a grimmer line now than it was when she laughed in Burke’s arms in the grass. But the expression of her deepening eyes is strained, like her inspection is costing her physical pain. The other women are hushing comments behind hands and into sunburned ears but the sound of their voices, like the turning pages of books, ceases all at once as Jessica addresses me for the first time. “How has it taken you so long?” If it is an accusation, it doesn’t sound like one. The quiver of her lower lip is the only chink in her confident armor.

The restraining hand of the dark woman releases me and then I am there against her. She smells of earth and her hair is waist-length and loose. Our skin is the same temperature and shade so our embrace is seamless and I feel like I am melded to her as she continues to speak, perhaps to the birds, perhaps to herself.

“I wondered when you’d get here.”

#

Jesica

It is not a prison of stone and metal that we fear, but one built of words and promises. And all of us walked willingly into their shackles, not imagining how abstract laws can become real chains in a single generation. I have been waiting to tell you this story since before you were born.

On my assigned report date, I kissed Burke goodbye and joined thousands of other women from our building in transit to the hovership port. First, they told us on the intercom, we would be issued uniforms. We queued up before glass windows in lines to receive them and we were allowed, even encouraged to talk. There was a heat of anticipation in the air and genuine sunlight floated in through large hangar windows. The rumors and hopes went around. Maybe this enlistment thing was the answer. Maybe it would offer the freedom we’d all been craving. Each of us shared that hunger and that is why we were chosen, regardless of fund affiliations and family hierarchies.

Everyone was too busy jabbering about where we’d be sent to notice that only the most attractive, intelligent, and athletic women had been drafted. Young women, at the peak of fertility. No one thought of the thousands of beds and marriages back home, now unconsummated in a time when population growth was our constant goal. I wasn’t suspicious yet. Caught up in it, even. A little relieved to be away from the routine and the grey and Burke’s rages and tears. So when I was called up to the window and then pointed to a small green room to take my portrait, I wore a genuine smile and my steps hardly seemed to connect with the concrete.

Photographic evidence completed, pretenses fell like shattered glass. They shut us in trains stuffed so tight we couldn't bring anything but what we were wearing. Told us we were being sent to boot camp. Shuttled us miles from home, shuffled us like cards diverting some units this way and that until no familiar faces could be snatched out in the crowd. Like animals, we were made to line up to dispensers for nutrients and made to waste in our uniforms which were specially lined just for that. When we arrived after disorienting days of travel, it was not to exotic shores or even to army barracks, it was to cells in laboratories just like Burke's. Reflect on them, the thousands of those cells in the bellies of so many hundred cities filled with their own neighbors and not a single one in his lab coat overlooking from the ramp above to question the system that brought us to his feet to be studied like livestock.

#

J.

I am allowed that wonderful, perfect fantasy embrace with my mother for only an instant but I know I will spin those moments out, like fresh-blown glass, to look at their gleam and glitter in the sunlight forever. Jessica pulls away from me, wrapping her white arms around her own torso instead. The crowd around us blends back into the undergrowth until only the rustle of their bare feet in the grass remains to remind us of their presence.

I look at her and think, *I have so much I want to ask you.* But she gets the same words out before I can force a voice to mine.

#

Jessica

We were led over row upon row of concrete chambers like zoo enclosures set into the ground, overlooked by soundproof glass panels and a walkway, while they told us the truth.

Some version of it, anyway. This was to be our tour of duty. The war would be fought not with guns or strategy but with the last product the UCSA hadn't yet figured out how else to mass-produce. Everything was going to be alright and our service was appreciated. In every room, a single padded gurney sat with its straps and wires slack and waiting. It was not the role of soldiers we would be playing after all, but test subjects. I stood and watched as every woman in front of me was separated from the line and shown into a chamber by doctors in white masks and with unsympathetic eyes. Some had to be tranquilized while others shuffled ahead, necks bent. I chose the defiantly dignified posture of one accepting her fate and entered my cell a few steps ahead of my captors knowing only that I did not yet know enough to bother with escape. But I had to remain awake if I wanted to learn anything more and that meant, for now, compliance.

I tolerated jabs and pokes, probing fingers of men taking notes and scan after scan without complaint. I saved up chips of conversation and rearranged and turned them over in my head until they were smooth and familiar. We were not just subjects but incubators. The UCSA needed more babies and test tubes still don't make good wombs. They piped propaganda to us constantly over loudspeaker. After a while, I stopped trying to argue with every sentence in my head as it came into my chamber. It was easier that way.

#

J.

It doesn't take long to tell my whole story. The setting doesn't change much. She fills in words as they leave my mouth so often that I feel like we're two chapters of the same book. I'm the beginning. She's somewhere in the middle. I tell her about the photos last, after skipping most of the night before my escape. "He made me to bring you back, and he was mad that I'm not a good enough copy."

She shakes her head, squeezing a food pouch from my backpack into her mouth. Several of the other women are scrounging around inside it now, too greedy and hungry to be afraid anymore. It's too dangerous to make a fire as evening falls and they've been running low on supplies for a while now, Jessica says. I tuck my hands into my jumpsuit thinking that if I weren't wearing it, someone would be trying to take it, too.

"Where is he now?" The hunger in her eyes feels like betrayal.

#

Jesica

They inserted tubes in me and the haze grew such that I no longer had to fight the urge to speak out of turn. A warmth flowed through me, not unlike the security of a lover's arms, but somehow false. It made me compliant, if not accepting. I was a prisoner by virtue of the monstrosity planted inside me. Confined where I lay with nothing to stare at but the cracks in the uniform concrete walls, I had time which had seemed like such a scarce commodity in the city. Traded one grey cell for another, I suppose. Sometimes, I wondered about my companions. Thousands of us, all bearing babies with the same face. Were they crumbling like me? I thought of Burke, sometimes, in my weakest. If only he knew about this. Worse, the chilling thought wormed its way in: he did. Was this what made him so desperate for us to escape? Did he know what large-scale purpose was in my future? Even worse, perhaps he knew and pulled me hard enough so that I would turn in the opposite direction and believe this was my own choice. I think it was then that free will became an illusion. Its origin was impossible to track.

I will not bore you long with this. I know you are impatient for the end, which is really your beginning. Nine long months I was strapped there. Biding my time and growing not only a replicate but also a plan. One of the nurses was a dissenter. I could tell by the way she looked in

my eyes and not at the floor when she checked on me. Kindness, I saw, and humanity. When the doctor's back was turned once, I whispered only one word that I could think of. "Help."

She replied nothing then. Turned away before the doctor caught us. It might have been lost. But a few cycles later, she took my hand which had grown so frail I thought she might crush it while she drew my blood, and leaned down by my ear. "After the delivery," she breathed, "The door will be unlocked." My courage and the creature that looked like a small fish on the ultrascreen both kicked to life.

#

J.

Jesica is hard in her beauty, polished smooth and feline where I am tender, still budding at the fingertips, hot with my constant growth. I can see now how faint of a reincarnation I truly am. It's been hours and still the interrogation doesn't show any signs of winding down for sleep. Jesica is breathing hard as she gestures next to me, alive. I know Burke would be overjoyed and this thought soaks me in a feeling I have been raised to know from my cell: envy. "What did he tell you about my draft?" she presses, digging her nails into my hand in her urgency. Her touch is pain the same instant as it is joy. I wonder if this is what he felt about me, too.

"I don't know that he figured it out until after you were gone. Maybe even after I was born."

Her eyes, live with the fire when they should have reflected only darkness, probed mine for truth until I felt compelled to explain more.

"The lie. That surrogates are just regular women shuffled from everywhere else."

"And what did he do with that knowledge?" Her voice was serious, hiding a manic ferocity like a poorly-restrained wildcat.

“He made me.” I answer the question before I realize she’s talking to herself.

#

Jesica

I went into labor exactly in my fortieth week, if the murmurs of the pleased doctors were correct. My swollen body tightened and I closed my eyes as drugs rushed my system from countless needles, not knowing if what the nurse told me was true but knowing I was going to have to try anyway. The worst part is, as they carried my prisoner away wrapped in a blanket, the next generation’s newest Brave Soldier, I wanted nothing more than to believe and go with him. It would have been so much simpler than trying to begin whatever I was. But my legs were slick with blood I had not agreed to sacrifice and my body had been owned by the state for long enough. I slipped from the delivery chair with a wince. My feet were cold as they slap-slap-slapped across the cell and my insubstantial gown fluttered in the air rushing through the open door. My chair waited, stained in blood, inviting me to return while it was still safe. I closed the door and turned away. Behind, my old life was a kiss in the dark still burning for me. But maybe it was better the way ahead. Maybe trying again was better than a memory.

He tried. I knew he would. But even in the moment that I saw you, I wished that he hadn’t. My memory should have been enough.

#

Burke

I’m alone on a cattle car meant to ship me through the bowels of the corporation no more ceremoniously than any other commodity. Two silent guards are my only companions. I would ask them to kill me now, and I’m sure it won’t be long and they’ll grant my wish but I fear not even death will kill this memory.

Those who walk it both know and do not know that there is a fine line between actual ignorance and willful blindness. I asked to see the results of my cloned embryos as adults. I wanted a telescope to the future, a looking glass where I might glimpse how J. might turn out with a few more years of development. Krakov had asked to come, too. A little too eagerly, looking back. Surprisingly, they let us. The trust they put in those they think they own...

Bodies, masses of them, held upright by metal claws are dragged through the massive labyrinth of secret rooms under our lab like so much butchered meat. They are alive but not so much sentient thinkers as vessels for governmental purpose at the cheapest possible cost. Lined up in rows to receive helmets and uniforms the way hoverships are fitted with windows and paint, my masterpieces of genetic ingenuity await their fates with blank eyes and hardened mouths. I stand with my coworkers at the glass, staring past my reflection at the revelation that would have changed everything if it were made only five years earlier. The warehouse below us groans and blares with alarms and the creaking churn of machinery. We weren't breeding soldiers, we were breeding our oppressors. The men in masks that come in the night bearing lockets. The warehouse laborers that work without pay so our government conglomerates could grow fatter and our citizens more complacent. How we didn't see it before, I don't know. But it only makes sense for companies to use their own consumers. No wonder profits are higher than ever.

That night, the night that turned out to be the one before my arrest, I returned home to J. I returned to her knowing I should tell her what I couldn't tell Jessica before and praying the feeling in my gut that she wasn't going to be there was wrong.

#

Jesica

Did I ever believe in us, in love? Yes, of course. But it would be over-romanticizing to say I never stopped. For the longest time, memories of him were polluted by anger, infected with blame. The truth is, despite my reluctance for the stricter rules we found in the center, I probably would have been drafted from the country anyway. Were it not for Burke, they still would have come for me but they would have found a naïve creature and not the calculating, jaded woman I was made in the city. For that, I actually owe him my gratitude in a twisted way. During my captivity, I spent many a day hating him, hating the government, hating myself. I spent just as long loving all of them in turn.

By the time I escaped, I regretted everything I told them. I knew he could be arrested for what I gave up of our communications and treasonous plans. In fact, I'd forgiven him but I thought him dead until not long ago. But the sudden dissolution of my grief filled me with a new purpose. Yes, he made the largest of mistakes. But can I blame him for wanting our beginning back? I can see now that you are the stalest of copies, the manifestation of the desire for a second chance. I have a choice: take it as an offense or the grandest of romantic gestures. I have my own second chance now, and I'm going to use it to change the future instead of the past.

#

Burke

I awake from the delirium of the half-forgetting and the faces of the guards are over me. At first, like the confused cameras meant to interpret them, I must process that they are faces, not masks. And their faces are not those of my clones. I hardly have time to recognize relief before it becomes fear again, constricting the metallic walls in around me. So, I've avoided the

punishment of the Overseer after all. The ones from the crowd got to me first. Revolutionaries sparked by the betrayal of a milk bottle. They must have outsmarted the officers sent for my arrest. It seems an elaborate and costly ruse for the sake of insuring I fell into the right hands only for the chance to hold me up as what, the messiah? Am I going to teach or be crucified?

It is easy to rewrite our memories; they're tenuous instruments as it is for examining the past. Sometimes the world overtakes us and then we stumble over the future which is already here. The furious motion of the car's swaying beneath us seems to be slowing as Krakov offers me his hand.

#

J.

What does it mean to be wanted? To be born in the womb of a mother instead of an incubator. To be born to be yourself, someone that no one else has been first. I wish I knew. The women are planning an operation. They need supplies and they're going to release more surrogates. They've done it before. Half of them are pregnant, the other half weakened by months of containment and surviving on nothing out here. But it is their singular thought of toppling the establishment that contained them that inspires their march. Jesica wants to rescue Burke in the process. I haven't told anyone yet, but I'm going to do my best to stop her. We have walked, now, through three sunrises that streak the sky with spilled blood.

Having used up her need for me, Jesica walks up at the front surrounded by her innermost followers, the ones she freed on her initial attempt for freedom. As the newcomer, I feel their cool distrust hanging over us. The revulsion for my status as a replicate and the constant reminder that I'm an unwelcome living photograph scare me because there's nothing I can ever change about that. Their distrust, I understand, because I do have treachery in my heart. In

deference to that, I've been walking at the back of the group. I'm still shadowed by my discoverer who I now know as Ashani. At least, finally, there is time for my own questions. "Why doesn't she like me?" I ask, kicking a rock ahead of us with a pair of brown, tattered shoes Ashani borrowed for me from a silent woman with glass white hair. I feel the petulant jut of my lower lip and I try to force it back.

"I don't think she can bear it," Ashani offers. It is a frank but not unkind reply spoken as she looks out at the trees and not at me. I know it to be true as her words join the wind. I remind Jessica she was replaceable.

"I miss him too." It comes as a whisper; I didn't mean to say it out loud.

Ashani slows, allowing me to come abreast to her as we climb the sloping hillside. She gestures a sweeping motion to each of the swaying backs ahead of us. Some of them carry tattered jumpsuits tied into packs, others food, or an infant. "All of them miss somebody, too. It is what it is. But we have each other, now. You could leave if you wanted but if you wait, someday they'll see that you're meant to be here, too."

Doubtful, I think. I look at her face. It's nothing like mine, or Jessica's. There are no hard, geometric planes or shrewd angles. Hers isn't a cunning beauty. Rather, I see kindness in the honest dimples of her cheeks and fullness of her mouth, a not unpleasant plainness in her broad upturned nose. Having only known two for so long, I can't get enough of new faces.

"Am I? Meant to be here?"

She shrugged as if to say *it happened, didn't it?*

"How did she know about me before I got here?" The question leaves a void. I didn't realize until now how much room it was taking up inside of me. The birds are waking in the trees and I can still remember the sensation of cool leaves dragging against the ridges of my fingertips.

“She knows because I told her.”

“But she said she expected me before that.”

“She did. Because I gave birth to you before I escaped.”

I stop and turn to stare at her, supposing at first that she must be lying.

Palms up, she continues, “You weren’t my first. I knew something was different with you from the implantation. Usually it’s done in a room full of people. He put you in me in secret. Kept me sedated a lot more than needed. I didn’t fight so I knew somehow that you were special.”

At first, my mind instantly rejects the possibility. He’d told me the story of my birth hundreds, thousands of times. Never had I questioned my existence before him. Why hadn’t I? I shudder, realizing the state’s throwaway incubators had been just as disposable in my own supposedly enlightened mind. Shouldn’t my co-creator mean something to us? Clearly it didn’t mean anything to him. It should have. Fighting tears, I look ahead where Jessica’s auburn hair obscures her face as she lowers her head to murmur to a companion. Fury rises in my chest, burning something like my outrage after Burke left me for the last time. We were supposed to be each other’s.

Ashani glances at me and I’m grateful she pretends not to see the furious tears. She cuts her eyes up to the sky. “After you were born, I memorized his face, and yours. When Jessica and the others came for me, we escaped and shared our stories. We wanted to get everyone back to their own families someday. She recognized his description. Who could forget those outdated glasses? Since then, she was waiting for you but I have been, too. She wanted you for Burke. But you were mine first and I wanted you for you.”

Her hand reaches for mine as we crest the last hill that overlooks the city I had run from only days earlier. The distant walls glow in the early sunlight, haloed by a golden cloud of pollution. They did build it to be beautiful, to be consumed. But I think it was built to consume us, too. I let Ashani press my hand in between her palms, realizing the city means meeting horrors for both of us and, yet, it isn't so bad.

We walk into the fourth sunrise. What waits for us, I do not know. But, for the first time, I choose to find out for myself and I am not resurrected, I'm born.