

THE WAYSTATION

A Novel

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The Waystation

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Summary

Len has spent years hiding from herself and her past. When a stranger stumbles into her life, she finds herself reinvestigating events and emotions she thought she'd locked away long ago, but had apparently only been waiting for her to notice they were still there. Returning to her childhood home in search of answers, she finds that what awaits her is a recurrence of her old nightmares, but equally, the chance to move forward from them.

The Waystation is a science fiction novel that interrogates the concept of identity and how it is formed, examining in particular the ways in which stereotypes shape our perceptions of ourselves and our world. Through the lens of intersectional feminism, and focusing particularly on issues of gender, race, and mental health, this novel seeks to showcase the natural consequences of stereotyping through an accessible format. A critical examination of the sociological and psychological theories that underpin this foundation is included after the story, allowing for a clearer glimpse at the considerations that went into the structuring of the novel.

Chapter 1

It had been an hour since the worst of the storm had passed them by and the sand was starting to settle at last. The faint pinging off the shields had faded into nothing ten pages ago. She ought to get up and do the usual post-storm checks, but this was a good part and she was feeling a little indolent.

There was a knock on her door. She scowled and refused to look up from her book. The knock metamorphosed into a complex rhythm. With a deep sigh, she bookmarked the page and set aside her book, then crawled forward and folded up the bottom of her bedding. That freed enough space in her tiny room for her to open the door.

Manny was leaning against the opposite wall. "You got some time?"

She frowned at him.

"I could use a hand," he said. "One of the pipes in the water converter needs fixing."

That wasn't something she could afford to put off. She shut her door and followed him down to the kitchen on the first floor. Manny opened the side door and motioned her in. The tunnel was short and the door at the other end was already open. She entered the small building that housed all three converters, as Manny shut both doors behind them.

The panelling on the water converter had already been disassembled to reveal the thick, unwieldy pipes draped in hanging coils inside. "Hold these out of the way, will you?" Manny asked. "They kept whacking into me when I tried on my own. Couldn't move properly for anything."

The pipes had been drained for the repairs, but they were still heavy. She shoved them aside, then braced against the floor and held them clear as Manny crawled into the space she'd made to perform the necessary repairs. From her position outside, all she could see were his legs, and the faint glow of light from within. It took him some time, during which the occasional muffled curse bounced around the equipment. When he was finished, he squirmed backwards until he was free of the piping, then stood up and smacked his head on the edge of the equipment.

While Manny swore, she let go of the piping she'd been holding and headed to the computer to run a check. The systems came back clear. She waited till Manny was looking at her before giving him a thumbs-up.

"Oh, good," he said. "You'd think the damn thing would come with the ability to fix things. Not just yodel at me that there's something wrong."

It was a complaint he made at least once a week, every time his Resonance alerted him to a small problem in the equipment. The stories liked to say that Resonants could do anything with their powers, but the truth was that they had limits. It would be useful if he could bleed off the issue in some way. If a thought could clear a clog, or a touch could seal a crack, they wouldn't have to exert themselves quite so much in ensuring the Waystation equipment remained healthy.

But Manny's power only told him when something was wrong, and gave him no way to fix it. For that, he relied on his hands and intelligence, as anyone without powers did. She appreciated even his limited ability, though. She remembered what it had been like before he'd arrived; it had been a constant scramble to keep on top of things. She had been young then, and kept out of the hard labour, but she'd seen how much effort it took to keep the Waystation running. Manny's ability had meant that they could fix the small things before they became serious problems, and the number of crises they'd faced had dropped to near-zero after his arrival.

He still held out hope that he would one day learn to fix things with his ability, and had stayed at the Waystation to find a way to do so. She didn't think that it was possible, but she wouldn't tell him that. Some part of him had to know. It was his choice to stay. Sometimes, she wondered if he wasn't hiding from something or someone too. Or from himself. He seemed rather too fixated on the idea that his Resonance had to be useful.

"Do me a favour, run a check on the air purifier too," he said. "Something's niggling at me about it."

She started the scanner running, and got up, waiting until Manny was looking at her before she pointed at the purifier and raised an eyebrow.

"Don't rightly know." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Can't be bad enough for me to be picking up on. Yet."

She nodded.

Manny sighed and began to replace the panelling on the water converter. “Ah, we’re gonna need more scraps for printing. Remind me to tell Doc, will you?” He scowled at the purifier. “We’re knocking through the piping way too quick and we’ve not got much in the way of filters left. Don’t want us caught in windy season without a good stock.”

She had been through precisely one windy season with a faulty air purifier, and had no desire to go through another. The computer beeped, and she turned to check it. The readings were a little out of the normal range. It would have self-corrected given time, but she manually adjusted the levels to speed things up. The scan continued.

“All right there?” Manny asked.

She shrugged and made a see-sawing motion with her hand. She doubted that that had been the problem Manny had picked up on.

“You know best.”

She gave him an unimpressed look, earning a grin from him. “Well, better than me. I don’t have a head for figures, I’ll be the first to say that. I can muddle through all right but if I’ve got someone else to do the work, I’m sure as anything gonna make them do it. I don’t see a point in suffering if I don’t have to, eh? Oh, don’t give me that look.

It’s a motto more people should take up, if you ask me.”

He finished with the panelling but didn’t get up, stretching out on the floor instead. Despite the hard, rough surface, he looked comfortable. He liked to joke about growing up in the Lodges, and how that made everything seem like it was of high quality. She was almost certain that he was exaggerating, but she’d never stayed at a Lodge before, so she wondered sometimes about how large the nugget of truth wrapped within Manny’s fanciful exaggerations really was.

“Think about it,” Manny said. His eyes were closed and his arms were folded up under his head as a makeshift pillow. There was a faint sprinkling of dust across his dark, shaggy hair. “No point in suffering needlessly. Let’s have everyone make that their motto, and before you know it, everything’s just easy. People do what they’re good at and get people to help them with the things they’re bad at.”

Except that for far too many people in the world, needless suffering only mattered when it applied to them. The suffering of others around them was an acceptable trade-off for their own comfort.

“You don’t have to say anything for me to feel the sarcasm!” Manny laughed. “Fine, so it wouldn’t work. But it works between the two of us, eh? It works out for both of us. You help me with the numbers, and I’ll help you with the manual labour.” He opened his eyes and looked over, though he didn’t otherwise move from his sprawl. “Cooking’s yours too, which is to both our benefits because that way we don’t have a burned out shell of a Waystation, which is what we’d have if I tried.”

She inclined her head.

“You don’t have to be so quick about agreeing,” Manny grumbled. “Hasn’t that picked up anything yet?”

She turned to look. The check of the software had come back error-free. The physical check was almost complete, and nothing was out of the ordinary. She watched as the last few parts were scanned for flaws. The computer beeped and informed her that all systems were normal.

She turned back to Manny and shrugged.

“But something feels strange,” Manny complained. “I can’t rightly put a finger on it, but there’s something off.”

He scrambled to his feet and scowled at the air purifier. “I didn’t sense anything earlier when I was trying to work on the converter myself. So it must have just happened, eh?”

She watched as he peered at the front of the air purifier, where the main instrument panel was. Then he frowned and paced around the machine. He made three loops in total, and each time he circled around, he looked more confused.

“Ah, Len?” he said at last, glancing back at her. “I don’t think it’s the purifier. I think it’s something in this direction. But – out there.”

She frowned as she followed his finger. If he’d pointed the other way to where the caravan storage was, they might have something to go on. But there was nothing in the other direction save desert.

She got up and walked over, knocking on the wall and giving Manny a quizzical look.

“Don’t think so,” Manny said. “I just checked. Whatever it is, I guess it’s beyond the walls?”

She pulled out her notebook and flipped to a clean page to write. *Can you pick up problems in the natural environment?*

“Can’t say as I know,” Manny said. “How’d you even class that? If a rock’s breaking up under the wind, isn’t it meant to?”

It wasn’t a question she’d ever considered before, but she supposed that destruction could be considered natural in some circumstances.

“It’s not like I can find problems if I don’t have a baseline,” Manny said. “And I sure as anything haven’t memorised anything to do with rocks.”

That was another good point. Manny had had to study how every machine and structure in the Waystation was meant to be. His Resonance told him when there was a difference in what he knew it should be like, and what it was in reality. It wasn’t anything so convenient as a voice in his head that told him a pipe was going to burst soon; he had to work to be as good as he was in identifying problem areas.

It also meant that he shouldn’t be able to pick up on oddities if he didn’t have a baseline to compare it to. And of those things he was familiar with – buildings, piping, general machinery – she could think of nothing that would be out in the desert.

Perhaps it was the shields that he was sensing. It was unlikely, given that they had just undergone their biennial servicing. She shrugged and headed for the door that led outside. The best way to find answers was to search them out.

“Really?” Manny asked. “I thought you were the sensible one, Len!”

He followed her nonetheless. His ability could at least guide him in the appropriate direction, and he confirmed that the sense of wrongness became stronger as they travelled. The shields seemed fine to him, so they stepped out of them and continued forward. She kept a sharp eye on the horizon; the last thing she wanted was to be caught unawares by a sandstorm. They trundled on in a southerly direction, slogging their way up the sand dunes that the wind-flow always built up in that area.

“What is that?” Manny asked, and she looked in the same direction as him. There was a lump of something on the far side of the second dune.

They both slowed as they approached, wary of whatever the thing was. All of a sudden, Manny cursed and broke into a run. Startled, Len followed in his wake. It was only when she drew closer that she realised what Manny already had.

It was a body.

Poor soul, to have died almost in view of a Waystation. She dropped to her knees beside the still figure. The sand was loose enough that the body had sunk into it, beige and brown clothes blending into their surroundings. The red scarf tied around the person's nose and mouth was the only bit of colour on them. Len reached out, hesitated, then withdrew her hand to watch as Manny fumbled at the person's wrist.

"Can't tell a damn thing," he said, dropping the limp hand. "Give me a hand – ah, never mind."

He pushed his arms under the body and shoved up and over. The body rolled onto its back, and groaned.

Len scrambled backwards, eyes wide.

"Ah," Manny said. He scooped up the body and struggled to his feet. The person was lean but lanky, and his legs flopped in an ungainly manner as Manny took a few steps forward. That wasn't as bad as the way his head lolled backwards – all they needed was to break his neck bringing him in. Len loosened her hands from the fists they'd curled into. Her hands were gloved and the person was wrapped in layers of loose cloth. It was okay. She shoved at the person's shoulders and pushed his head onto Manny's shoulder as Manny readjusted his grip.

"Thanks," Manny murmured.

They took a few steps towards the Waystation together, but Manny couldn't run while carrying the person. Len glanced between him and the Waystation.

"Go ahead and tell Doc," Manny wheezed.

Len checked the horizon one last time. They should be okay. She took off for the Waystation at a run, doing her best to ignore the burn in her legs as she went up the dune. Down again she went, and up another, slowing despite her best intentions. She let gravity speed her down the last dune, and jogged across the flatter plains beyond. They had left the shields unlocked, so it was only a matter of seconds to get through them, and then she was bursting through the converter room and into the

main building. Her side hurt. She'd never done much in the way of running before. She didn't think she liked it.

She hurried through the kitchen and into the medical room next to it. The door slammed open with more force than she'd intended, and she flinched at the sound. Doc jumped too, then heaved a deep sigh and clicked her tongue.

"You're not a child, to be banging about like that," she scolded, frowning. "Have some consideration. What if I'd been in the middle of an experiment?"

Len put up one finger, and pulled out her notebook. *Manny found someone alive outside the Waystation. Unconscious, doesn't look in great shape. He's bringing him in now.*

Doc read the note over, then raised an eyebrow. "Alive, after that windstorm yesterday? He's lucky."

Len hadn't thought of that. She fidgeted.

"Go make sure Manny's okay," Doc ordered, opening cupboards and pulling out medicines and syringes. Len nodded, though Doc wasn't looking at her, and headed back out. This time, she stuck to a brisk walk instead of running. There was still a lingering ache right below her ribs.

Standing by the door, she could see Manny slogging through the sand towards the Waystation. He was as used to carrying a person around as she was used to running. It would be easier on him if she helped. She could take the person's legs, and Manny could grab him under the arms. She flexed her fingers. Her gloves rasped.

She strode out towards the shields and kept an eye on the horizon as Manny approached. When he reached the shields, she held each set of access panels open for him, then secured them as he stumbled on towards the Waystation. After double-checking that the shields were locked down again, she hurried towards and past him, opening each door as he got to them so that he wouldn't have to struggle any more with his burden.

Doc had pulled a gurney out into the middle of the medical room. Manny dropped the person onto it with a relieved groan.

"Let's see what we have," Doc said, and began undoing the red scarf knotted across the person's face. Manny stepped forward to help by taking off the stranger's lightweight shoes. They weren't meant for extended travelling. He couldn't have been

a habitual traveller – someone who had been moving between cities, perhaps, or a first-time pilgrim.

Len wondered if she should help. Touching cloth was fine, but undressing someone meant getting close to skin, which made her uncomfortable. She'd touched him once already, she reminded herself, and nothing had happened. But in the absence of true need, she couldn't bring herself to step up again. She pressed her lips together and leaned against the wall. She was still near enough to see what they were doing.

The stranger had dark hair, cut close to the scalp, and a small nose and thin lips. His closed eyes looked large. His chin was narrow, giving his otherwise plain face an impish cast. He had a cut on his cheek that was oozing blood, and a few scrapes across his face that were already scabbing over.

Doc began to divest the person of their outer layers, and Len shifted in mild surprise. It was a woman, though she had never seen a woman with such short hair before. She felt self-conscious about her own hair, all of a sudden, and reached up to pat the bun at the base of her neck. When she had first come to the Waystation, she had cut off her hair in a fit of rebellion, because its length and thickness had been something her mother had loved. It had been almost at her waist at that point, and she'd tied it back and cut a straight line above the tie, at about the level of her chin. Her hair had fluffed out into a sort of triangle, and stayed that way until it had grown out enough for its own weight to tame it. She had never cut it past her shoulders since.

If she had cropped her hair as this woman had done, she wondered if she would have maintained it that way, or if she would have let go of that form of protest at some point. Sometimes, when she brushed her hair, she could still feel her mother's fingers combing through them; could hear her voice asking if she wanted a ponytail or a plait. Cropping her hair could mean eliminating that sense-memory, but she wasn't all that certain she wanted to be rid of it.

Doc offloaded the woman's clothes onto Manny, who stood there for a moment as if uncertain what to do. Len waited until he was looking at her, then pointed at the floor by her feet. He brought them over and dropped them there.

“You sure?” he asked. She nodded; she’d wash them later so that the woman would have them ready when she was recovered. “All right then.”

“Minor radiation sickness,” Doc announced. She had a faint frown on her face. “Not bad enough for concern, that’s good. No dehydration, that’s strange. Looks like she collapsed from exhaustion. Could use a good meal. Something light.”

Doc’s tone of voice was dismissive. Len took one last look at the woman on the gurney, then scooped up the discarded clothing and left the medical room.

She went upstairs first, to the laundry area next to the bathrooms where she shook the worst of the dust and sand off the clothes before putting them in the automatic cleaner. The taps were running just fine; she’d have to remember to let Manny know that there were no issues following his repairs.

There were vegetables left over from their lunch earlier. She poured some water into a pot and put it on the stove to heat. In went a packet of flavouring, followed by the vegetables. That should be light enough for the woman to handle.

It was early, but perhaps she should start on dinner as well. She would do no good in the medical room, in any case. She turned on the printer and retrieved a bag of food powder while it warmed up. She didn’t feel like making anything complicated. And it would be good to make something the woman could have as well, wouldn’t it? Another soup it was, though a heartier one in deference to Manny’s appetite.

The printer beeped. She filled up the water tank and emptied the bag of powder into the printer, then programmed it. Beef, potatoes, and carrots, in cubes. Onions, in slices. That would do.

She sat down at the small table in the kitchen and put her head down on her folded arms. The woman must have gotten separated from her caravan somehow. She was lucky to be alive. Lucky to have made her way close to a Waystation, lucky that Manny had somehow sensed and found her soon enough. If she was a Waystation employee, she would have gained some variation of Lucky as a nickname. There was no doubt about it.

She ran through the possibilities. Lucky, of course. Charmed? The only other synonym she could think of was ‘serendipity,’ and that seemed a bit of a mouthful.

Lucky it was, at least until she had a name for the woman. And perhaps after. It wasn’t as if anyone would know what she thought of the woman as.

She let her mind drift as she waited. The printer whirred, and every so often, something went splat as it fell into the tray. Lucky would have to wait until the next caravan came through. That should be in two weeks. If her luck held out, they would be able to take her on and she wouldn't have to wait yet another month.

That assumed that she would be fully recovered within two weeks. There was no reason she wouldn't be, if exhaustion was the only issue. Doc was experienced with that sort of thing. There was a reason why every Waystation had to have a doctor on staff. It wasn't a posting any doctor normally liked, but the governments paid enough to make up for having to live out here. Hazard pay, which of course no other position at a Waystation was given. The governments were quite clear on which people were important. But at least Len was paid enough to order the treated clothes she needed, and the odd trinket to liven up her room. It wasn't like there was anything else to spend money on, out here. Her savings account back in Maraoma was comfortably plump.

Doctors tended to rotate out of Waystations every year or two, since their stays were entirely at their discretion. Doc had been at this Waystation for ages, though – only a few years less than Len – and sometimes, Len wondered why she didn't leave. Keeping an eye on Len ought to only go so far. Doc had come out here to report to Len's parents about her, but even with additional research to keep her busy, she should have demanded someone take over long ago. It didn't make sense that Doc hadn't made any noise about leaving after all this while.

The printer whirred a last time and fell silent. She remained where she was for a moment, then dragged herself up with a sigh to retrieve the waterproof gloves she wore over her everyday cloth gloves while cooking. Potatoes and carrots and onions and beef. Again. She was so bored of it all. There were only so many ways you could cook the same ingredients, especially with how limited her supplies were. Sometimes, her mother would decide to make a dish on a whim, and they'd go out to the shops to pick up the ingredients they didn't have at home. They'd get cream, or green onions, or mushrooms, and they'd come home and do their best to follow whatever recipe her mother had found. They'd done steaks with mushroom sauce once, and a quiche another time, and they'd failed as many times as they'd succeeded but it had always been fun. It had been a thing just for her and her mother. Those memories were still

coloured with fondness, despite all that had happened since. She couldn't change those feelings. Those sporadic breaks from their usual style of cuisine had always been such an adventure.

But here, she couldn't exactly put on a coat and run out for cream. She had to make do with what she had, however unpalatable that had become over the years. Rice and beef and chicken and potatoes and carrots and beans and onion and spinach and oranges and biscuits. Those were the only foods they had templates for, and even the biscuits were a dry, bland, wheaty affair that were in no way the treat they were supposed to be.

At least they got regular supplies of flavouring packets on supply runs, and sometimes pilgrims brought food as their gift of thanks, or she might have given up and gone back to Maraoma in disgrace.

But even the promise of good food wasn't enough to make up for those memories. If she could be assured of safety, she thought that she would have left the Waystation a long time ago. She had been on the brink of it once – had only been waiting to turn sixteen and legal so that she could leave without obtaining parental permission. Then an official had arrived at the station. Two days after her sixteenth birthday, she had received the tattoo that marked her as a Resonant, and lost all sense of complacency. If the authorities hadn't forgotten about her after all that time in a pokey little Waystation, who else might be paying attention? Who else might be waiting for her to come within reach? The thought had paralysed her with fear.

She covered the pot and left the soup to simmer. The rice could wait until everyone was ready to eat, or it would go cold in the meantime.

She wiped down the printer, rinsed off her gloves and cleaning cloths, and sat back down at the table, already bored of waiting. She considered going upstairs to get her book, but suspected that she would be unable to focus. Besides, she had read it thrice already, and its hold over her had weakened. With any luck, the next caravan would have some new books she could trade with them. She leaned back in her chair and stretched out her legs, too apathetic to find anything to do.

"She should be okay," Manny said.

She tilted her head back, then forward as Manny sat down at the table with her.

“Came around for a bit, but she’s a little out of it,” he said. “Doc’s keeping her in medical till she’s steadier on her feet. She gave her medicine for the radiation sickness, so it should pass by tomorrow. The rest was minor cuts and abrasions, but no serious wounds and no head injuries.”

Len nodded. Doc was good at what she did; she would ensure that the woman recovered. Every time Doc put her skills to use, Len felt a little guilty about the uncharitable thoughts she sometimes had about her. It was hard not to grumble when Doc never pitched in to help maintain the Waystation, choosing instead to spend all her time on her research projects. Len managed to help her with those projects and still maintain the Waystation, so why couldn’t Doc help out a little in return? But when a caravan rolled through, Doc was always ready with her medicines, checking over everyone for radiation sickness, or dehydration, or sunburns, or the myriad other ailments that plagued incautious desert travellers.

Doctors were important, unlike general workers like Len or Manny.

“Her name’s Eira,” Manny continued. “She told us that much. Got separated from her caravan in that last storm, she said.”

Eira. Len pictured the woman’s face, and placed the name ‘Eira’ over it. She wondered what the name meant. If it had a meaning. She thought she might continue to think of the woman as Lucky instead, at least until she found out if the meaning of Eira’s name suited her better.

Len’s old name had been chosen for its meaning. She’d shed that, too, name and meaning and all associations thereof, when she’d arrived here and learned of the Waystation tradition of giving each resident a new name. It was normally associated with their main jobs – hence Doc, for Doctor, and Manny for Handyman, but she’d been young enough not to have a job and so she’d chosen her new name as a form of protest. She’d been angry at so many things in the beginning. Now, she looked back on her childish actions, and was grateful that her first associates at the Waystation had at once shortened the embarrassing new name she’d picked to ‘Len’.

Manny snapped his fingers, making her start.

“You weren’t listening to a thing I was saying, were you?” he asked.

She smiled and shook her head.

“And not even an apology,” he complained. “Is there anything to eat? I’m starved.” He gave her a hopeful look. “Early dinner?”

She frowned at him, then sighed and nodded.

“You’re the best,” Manny said. He got up and went in search of food powder. He couldn’t be trusted with the stove, but he was capable of making his own biscuits or rice, and she was happy to remind him of that fact every time he forgot.

She closed her eyes and listened. Manny’s footsteps, back and forth. The hiss of the fire on the stove. The bubbling of the simmering soup. The crinkle of a bag of food powder. The gurgle of water being poured into the printer. The whirring of the printer as it came to life. She acknowledged and dismissed each sound as it occurred, straining for the sounds that lay beyond. It was no use. She could hear nothing of the weather outside. That was good. The only way she would hear the wind would be if they were in the middle of a storm. Even the shields wouldn’t stop the howling then. And it was a good thing that there was no storm. It was safe. This quiet meant the Waystation was safe.

She opened her eyes and stared at the table. She was bored. It felt like she had been bored for months and years now. It came and went. Ebbled and flowed like the wind. But it had been getting stronger in recent months.

She liked the routine of Waystation life, she did. She didn’t want to return to Maraoma, or any other city. The Waystation was her home. She had been here for – how long had she been here?

She counted back. She had come here in the year 112 NR, when she’d been ten, and it was now 127 NR. It had been fifteen years. Stars. That sounded so long. Women lived seventy-five years on average, so that was a fifth of her life she’d spent here, out here in the middle of nowhere. Twenty-five years old, and she already felt like there was nothing more to be done with her life. No, there was no use thinking like that. She would be staying here for years to come, after all.

In the beginning, she had only been asked to pitch in with simple chores. Children should play, the doctor back then had said, except what he had expected her to play with, she didn’t know. Besides, she’d been sullen and angry at the world, and so she’d spent most of her time avoiding people and burying herself in books instead. The doctor had tried to make her socialise, but had given up after a while. When Doc

had come to replace him, he hadn't been quiet about telling her that Len was a "bit of a hopeless case, that one" and that he "wouldn't be surprised if she ran for the wind." Hearing that had made Len perversely determined not to prove him right. Fortunately, Doc hadn't demanded that Len "act like a normal child" – whatever that meant. Instead, she'd given her plenty of educational texts, telling her that her parents wanted to keep her up to date on everything she should be learning.

The source of those texts had made Len want to deny them, but she'd ended up working her way through everything simply because there was nothing else to do. When she'd hit fifteen, Marissa had left, and Len had taken over cooking and cleaning duties for the Waystation; two years later, Sparky had left and Len had added his duties assisting Doc to her own. Losing them had been hard, but after that, she had grown used to the turn-around. Few people stayed at Waystations as long as she had.

But neither staying nor helping Doc with her research had been a hardship. Having something to do kept her mind moving through the days when she wanted to lie down and not get up. Even when Manny had arrived, she had only split those duties with him instead of giving any one job up entirely; the variety was too important to let go of, in this place where the monotony was the biggest cause of people giving up. It had gotten her through all this time, but she didn't want to think about continuing on in this way for the rest of her life.

She frowned and got up to check on the stew. It was ready, so she turned the heat down as low as it would go and dished up two bowls. Manny brought his rice over to the table and accepted his bowl of stew.

Len sat down with her own small bowl. She didn't like eating in front of strangers, but she had grown to tolerate eating around Manny and Doc. All the same, she waited until he wasn't looking at her before she put a spoonful of stew in her mouth. She got in two chews before the food dissolved. She kept eating, focusing on the seconds-long bursts of flavour on her tongue. Her portion had been small, and she didn't interrupt herself to talk, so she was finished long before Manny was. She licked her lips, tasting nothing, and pushed aside her empty bowl.

Manny was talking between bites. He had an uncanny ability to talk about nothing at all for hours on end. It had been overwhelming when he'd first come to the

Waystation, but she was used to him now. She knew how to pay just enough attention to nod in the right places, so that he'd go on without trying to draw her in.

It was a little strange. She had had a variety of colleagues since her arrival, and none had been so content to monologue at her. Her silence had always disconcerted them, and they had come to say only the minimum to her in return. She had amused herself by thinking that her silence had been infectious, until Manny had come.

Manny, with his indefatigable cheer and ridiculous jokes and willingness to make a fool of himself to get a smile out of Len. Manny, who recognised Len's presence as acceptance, and kept talking because he knew that she found the tone and rhythm of his stories comforting. Manny, who didn't push when she had had enough, and who could in fact be quiet for a while if she requested it.

Who might be an actual friend, if she dared admit it to herself.

"I see dinner's ready," Doc said, entering the dining area with their mystery woman. "Is there anything suitable for Eira?"

Len got to her feet without comment. Doc always had a habit of demanding something and then asking after it later, as if she'd given Len a choice. Trust a government scientist to act like her orders were requests. Len ladled the warm vegetable soup into a bowl and brought it back to the table, setting it before Lucky.

"Thank you," Lucky said with a smile.

Len nodded and moved to the printer to get a portion of rice going.

"I take it you're feeling better?" Manny asked, as Lucky sipped at her soup.

"Much," Lucky said. "Doc's been great." She cast a curious glance over at Len.

"Ah, you haven't met Len," Manny said. "Len, this is Eira. Eira, Len. She does most of the cooking around here, so if you're hungry outside of the usual meal times, ask her."

"I'll remember," Lucky said. She was wearing one of the soft robes that Doc kept for those patients who had to remain under her care for longer than a day, and seemed unabashed about her comparative lack of dress. "It's nice to meet you, Len."

Len dipped her head in a half-bow.

"She doesn't talk, but she can hear and understand you fine," Manny said.

"Wouldn't have found you if it weren't for her, you know? She's the one who knows

the weather around here best. If she weren't here I'd never have gone out to look for what my ability was picking up."

"Oh, you've got a – what's it called, a Resonance?" Lucky asked, as if the tattoo on Manny's face hadn't already given him away. Or perhaps she really didn't know what it signified, given that she wasn't from Maraoma and didn't even seem certain of the word she'd used. If that was the case, then with any luck, she wouldn't ask about Len's own facial tattoo. Maybe she'd think that Manny and Len had decided to get matching red stripes across their faces just for the fun of it. "Do you mind me asking what it is?"

"Sensing things gone wrong," Manny said, then laughed at the look of confusion on Lucky's face. He explained it, and she made the right noises in the right places. The printer finished its work. Len put the cooked rice into a bowl, scooped some stew into another bowl, and brought them both over to the table. Doc arranged them before her, and held a hand out. Len got a spoon and handed it over before sitting back down.

"Is the weather thing your ability, Len?" Lucky asked.

Len shook her head, then pointed at her eyes before tapping the side of her head.

"That's impressive," Lucky chuckled.

Manny made a thoughtful sound. "You got that?"

"Sure," Lucky said, before her face fell. "Um. Maybe. Were you saying you use your eyes and brain? No ability, just being observant?"

Len had never before met someone who could accurately read her gestures without getting to know her first. A touch of curiosity broke through her lethargy, and she nodded in response as she wondered if it had been a fluke.

Lucky gave her a brilliant smile that made her cheeks warm. She looked away and caught Manny smiling at her, so she lowered her gaze to the table, flustered and out of sorts.

"Well, you shouldn't have any trouble talking to Len," Manny said.

"I'll do my best," Lucky said.

"I told Len you said you'd gotten lost in that storm," he continued. "But how'd you get split up from your caravan anyway?"

“Oh, I was side-walking,” Lucky said. Despite the name, side-walkers didn’t walk; they were the ones who travelled in the perimeter cars that the caravan’s shield was anchored to. Each car carried one driver, and one side-walker to stand on the ledge outside the car and keep a constant visual inspection of the shields, so that imminent problems were caught quickly. They were the ones most at risk if the shield failed in any way, and Len suspected she knew what might have happened.

“The generator point started to fail,” Lucky continued, as Len had expected. “And the backup wasn’t kicking in. My partner called in for a halt to get an engineer. Well, before he came back, the point failed and the next thing I knew, there was electric fabric in my face and I fell off the car. I guess the shield must have re-aligned with me on the outside.” She shrugged. “It was right in the middle of the storm, so I lost the caravan in seconds.”

Her tone was casual, but her body was hunched in on itself. It must have been terrifying. Storms were bad enough when safely behind a shield. To have that shield fail was the worst nightmare of most desert travellers and Waystation dwellers. It wasn’t so bad in the cities, which had multiple redundancies built into their shielding systems. But outside them, everyone feared a windstorm. It wasn’t the biggest killer of desert travellers, but it was the most painful way to go.

Perhaps she wasn’t so lucky after all, if that had happened to her. But at least she had survived it.

Len would have to try and remember to think of her as Eira, instead of Lucky.

“That’s horrible,” Manny said, his voice somehow aghast and sympathetic at the same time. “It’s a good thing you made it here before you really got hurt.”

“It could have been a lot worse,” Lucky acknowledged. *Eira*.

“The caravan shouldn’t have kept travelling once the storm hit, anyway,” Doc said with a disapproving expression. “Standard procedure is to stop and let it blow over. You’d have cause to complain if you wanted to. That you didn’t suffer more from your fall, or end up dehydrated after, is almost a miracle.”

Eira laughed a little, shaking her head. “I’m just glad I got out,” she said. “There’s no point complaining anyway. Don’t most caravans drive through storms?”

“True enough,” Manny put in. “Especially if they’re low on supplies.”

“Which they were,” Eira said. “I just hope that the driver of that car made it okay as well. He had the car to protect him but if the shield realigned with him outside as well, then...”

“Much worse to be in your position,” Manny observed.

“I’m not saying it wasn’t,” Eira said, stirring her bowl of soup. “There were actually two storms, I think? I don’t know if I got turned around and ended up going back into it. After I got lost I just hunkered down to wait it out, since I figured the caravan would also have stopped there, and I could re-join them once I could see again. Well, the storm stopped a few hours later but the caravan was nowhere in sight – I guess they gave me up for lost – so I followed the nearest signposts. I don’t think the caravan meant to stop here, so I must have been following the wrong Route signs, but at least it got me to safety.”

Doc made a soft sound low in her throat, and glanced sidelong at Eira before returning her attention to her food. In that brief moment, Len saw a degree of calculated curiosity in Doc’s eyes that made her stomach turn.

“And you ended up in another storm?” Manny asked in concern.

“Yeah, the next day,” Eira said. “Once I couldn’t see past my hand, I sat down to wait it out again, and I guess at some point I fainted. Next thing I remember, I’m waking up to Doc’s face.” She smiled.

“You were already so close to us!” Manny said. “If you’d made it past those dunes you’d have seen us.”

“True,” Eira said. “Or I might have gotten turned around again and headed away from you. At least it worked out in the end.”

Manny concurred, then asked Eira about where she was headed. The conversation turned to Maraoma and what prospects might be available there for an immigrant. Doc kept watching Eira with a cold, curious gaze, but she didn’t interject at any point. The look on her face was discomfiting – it had the air of a scientist regarding a specimen under a microscope. Len remembered being on the receiving end of that look. She folded her hands on her lap so that no one would see the fine tremors that had started running through them.

She was being silly. Anyone would be curious about a newcomer who'd arrived in such a dramatic fashion. That was all there was to it. She pushed aside her uneasiness and focused on breathing.

Chapter 2

A day at the Waystation, for Len, was straightforward. She had her duties, and she carried them out with an ease born of familiarity. She had been moving through the routine for years, and sometimes thought that she could perform her work while asleep.

She woke early in the morning to make breakfast. After eating, she dusted the furniture and swept the floors clean of the sand that always managed to sneak indoors. Then she prepared lunch, and afterwards checked on whether Doc needed assistance with anything.

Doc's research was focused on radiation-related illnesses, which made being out here a boon for her in terms of research material. It didn't, however, mean that she would voluntarily subject herself to checking on the monitors out in the desert, so Len would find out what measurements needed checking that day, then head out to take them. Most of the time, she also ended up helping Doc with crunching the numbers – she didn't have the scientific knowledge that Doc did, but she could do that much, at least.

Doc kept telling her that she ought to pick up a research project of her own. She'd done one a few years ago, when she'd studied some of the local plant-life under Doc's supervision, but she hadn't felt like doing anything else since. Helping Doc out was about as far as her research would go. She'd done enough in her time at the Waystation that Doc had even put her name down on a few papers as co-contributor. That was all she needed; as long as she had some sort of work to keep her mind busy, she didn't need official accolades.

Though – in the past year or so, even doing that much had become more difficult, for some reason. She did at least manage to get through the daily routine, which some days, felt like an accomplishment all on its own. But there was a strange sort of agitation that dogged her now; that, if she was honest, had followed her ever since her sixteenth birthday and foiled plans to leave. Exhaustion and restlessness came in turns to wring her into a tight ball of misery, until she felt stretched and taut and ready to split apart. Until she felt ready to tear herself open, if only for the novelty of feeling something different.

She tried not to think too hard about what that said about her.

Once evening came on, she'd leave to get dinner going, and she often went for a walk after that to stretch her legs before retiring for the night. Interruptions to the routine came only when Manny required assistance with maintenance, or when a caravan came through. Caravans were expected to handle their own affairs, save for food, which was meant to be provided by the Waystation. Or by Len, rather. On such occasions, she also spent a good deal more time either locked up in her room or outside the Waystation so as to avoid the travellers. But those were minor changes, and even they had become routine.

Everything was routine. People often commented, with an air of being the first person to make such an observation, that it must be dreadfully boring to be stationed out here. She had taught herself, in her first year here, to think of it as being peaceful instead. It was the only way she had been able to accept the change, and she had grown to believe herself in time.

She liked living at the Waystation, away from the cities, away from people who would stare and whisper. Away from people who would judge her for the tattoo on her face. Who would expect things of her that she couldn't or wouldn't deliver. Away from her father, and his colleagues.

It was safe here.

She didn't want anything else. She couldn't, because that would mean giving up safety, and she didn't dare do that.

No amount of restlessness would change that, she told herself, and tried to ignore the way it felt like a lie.

Curled up on the couch, Len tore her blank gaze away from the wall and looked about for a distraction. Her gaze fell on Manny and Eira, who were sitting at the kitchen table, nursing drinks. Eira was wearing clothes out of the Waystation's storeroom, which amongst other things, contained various sizes of clothes for loan to travellers in need. Crossing the desert could be hard on the clothing, and a loan of clothes while their own were mended was a frequent request. The plain trousers and shirt weren't flattering in the least, but Eira wore them with distressing confidence. Len tucked her hood closer around her face, then sank sideways, out of their line of

sight. They weren't being too loud, but nothing else was making noise and so Len could hear them if she strained her ears the slightest bit.

"But what do you do for, you know, entertainment?" Eira asked.

"There's not much to do," Manny said. "We've got a small telly out front, you must have seen it?" It was hard to miss, mounted on the wall as it was. Save for a table with an outdated computer and a few couches, there was little else in the reception area. The computer was meant for record-keeping, and wasn't much use otherwise.

"I did, but I don't imagine you get anything new out here," Eira said.

"Nope," Manny said. "We never get anything live. Always a couple of months out of date, that's us. We've got some movies we put on when we've got guests here, but the three of us have seen them all dozens of times, so it's not exactly entertainment, eh?"

Eira laughed.

"We try and swap them out when a caravan comes through that's got some it's willing to trade," Manny said. "Same with books. Every four months there's a supply run, so even if we haven't traded anything with a caravan, we can order a limited number of things to keep ourselves busy. Depends on the space they've got, and the space here too, since the rooms are small. You sort of have to just keep yourself busy, find things to do, or you'll go mad."

And run for the wind. No, that was unfair. Everyone she had ever known who'd run for the wind had been that way inclined before they'd arrived at the Waystation. It wasn't the monotony of living here that had done it, though she supposed it hadn't helped. If they had been amongst people they knew and trusted, in a familiar place, with distractions aplenty – might they have managed to stave off that call?

Suchi had been so tiny, and her eyes so dead. Len didn't think that anything could have changed her mind, no matter where she was. Her death hadn't exactly come as a shock, but it had still been distressing. Len had only learned afterwards what the suicide rates for Resonants were. It had made her think a little too much about where her own breaking point might be.

"So, a few movies, a few books, and the rest is up to you," Eira said. "I think I'd go mad anyway."

“You’d be surprised what you can get used to,” Manny advised. “But it’s not for everyone, that’s certain.”

Eira frowned and nodded. “Why’d you come work here?”

“To get a handle on my Resonance,” Manny said. “It’s why most of us come out here. Me, I chose it, but those who’ve got the more dangerous abilities, they’re assigned away from the cities until they get control over them, yeah? Fewer people out here, lots of empty land to experiment. Well, that’s what it is for Maraoma. I don’t know about how the other cities pick the people to man their stations. It’s not all Resonants out here – Doc isn’t one – but the majority, yeah.”

“How nice of Maraoma to give you a place like this,” Eira said. Her voice wasn’t accusing, but there seemed to be an underlying bite to it. .

“It’s good of them,” Manny said. “But of course it means a high turn-around. I think Doc and Len have been here the longest, but most folks leave within a year or two at most. I’ve been here going on three, myself.”

Len had been here for fifteen years. She had gone so long without thinking of the time she had spent here, and now it seemed like that was all she could think of. Fifteen years. It hadn’t been unproductive. She’d never taken formal tests, but she was as educated as any city-bred child. In some ways, she was better educated – it wasn’t just anyone who was asked to do more than grunt work while assisting a government scientist. And she’d taken care of this place, which was a job that was overlooked but important.

But how long could she stay before she broke? She wanted more, and that was a dangerous line of thought.

She rolled up onto her feet and trundled up the stairs to her room. Perhaps she’d sleep, just for a little while, before she had to set about making dinner.

On entering her room, she locked the door, then dropped to her knees and rolled her bedding down. She flopped onto it with a tired sigh. Eira’s arrival seemed to have sparked off all sorts of thoughts in her, and she didn’t like any of it. There was no reason for this stranger to have caused such a reaction. She’d barely interacted with Eira at all. They had shared one meal, along with Doc and Manny, and they’d exchanged greetings when they passed each other the subsequent day. That was all.

Eira had come and would go, as did every other traveller who passed through a Waystation.

Still, that strange disquiet she felt whenever she caught Eira's eye wouldn't settle.

She tossed and turned, leaving her bedding in disarray, but failed to get any sleep. When evening came on, she gave up altogether, neatened up, and headed down to the kitchen. Cooking might help calm her.

She set the food to printing, pulled out everything she'd need, and paced the kitchen until the printer had finished. The beef was already simmering before she realised what she had begun to make, and by then it was too late to stop. She cut up the spinach, hearing her mother's voice. "Line it up and chop it small. You want it fine so that it cooks fast. It works with any vegetable, you know?" She put spinach in another pan with a packet of flavouring that her mother would never have deigned to use. The scent of the curry stung her eyes, and she removed a cooking glove so that she could rub the tears away.

When the curry was ready, she portioned out the rice and put everything out on the table, hesitating for a moment over how many places she had to set. She arranged four sets of plates and utensils around the table, then rang the bell to announce dinner before she could change her mind.

She stared at the food while waiting for the others to arrive, then turned on her heel and headed to the pantry to retrieve a bottle of pickles. It was one of Doc's indulgences, and she always ordered a few bottles with every supply run. Lemon or mango. Len pursed her lips and selected the mango. It wasn't half as good as the stuff Len's mother made, but then neither was anything Len had just cooked, so it would fit in with this meal just fine.

"This does look good," Doc said as she settled into her seat.

"What's the occasion?" Manny joked. He pulled out a chair for Eira, and sat down next to her.

Len shook her head. The fourth plate at the table seemed to laugh at her. It wasn't too late to take her food with her, or to say that she wasn't hungry yet and would eat later. Eira looked up and gave her a small, soft smile, the corners of her eyes wrinkled with good humour.

Len sat down. Her ears felt hot.

Manny gave her a surprised look, but didn't comment as he served up the beef and spinach to everyone. Len's hands shook a little as she began to eat. Manny tried not to look her way, and to block Eira's view as much as possible, for which Len was intensely grateful. Doc, on the other hand, looked over now and then, giving her a challenging look each time. Len was not at all ready to meet that challenge, and ended up waiting minutes between bites just so that she could eat without being observed.

It was a foolish anxiety to have, she knew. It wasn't as if anyone could tell what was happening just by looking at her. But she couldn't help but want to hide away all evidence of her Resonance, even when it was happening within her closed mouth.

She ate as quickly as she could with Doc looking over now and then, and Eira glancing at her whenever Manny wasn't quite able to block her. She should have just waited till everyone was done instead of inflicting this torment on herself. Her hands wouldn't stop shaking, but she did at least manage to control them enough that it wasn't too obvious.

She ate a last bite of rice with pickled mango, then got to her feet. She sketched a hasty nod to the table, dropped her plate in the sink, and fled to her room.

She tried to read for a while but couldn't keep her focus for long enough to process even a single page. In time, she gave up, and pulled out her journal in the hopes that putting down her wandering thoughts would help settle them. She wrote in brief about finding Eira, and about how lucky she was, and about how her mere presence was uncomfortable but attractive. She wrote about wanting simultaneously to learn more about Eira, and wanting nothing to do with her, and how peculiar it was when those feelings collided. When she was finished, she felt a little better, but no less confused.

Sighing, she re-read her entry. Then she frowned.

She ought to ask Manny about that. But not now, as everyone would doubtless still be engaged in conversation, and it would be awkward to try and break into the middle of that. Tomorrow.

She made one more attempt at reading. This time, she fell asleep with the book.

It was early when she woke up, so she did a quick check of the air filters and swapped out two that were getting filthy, washing and hanging them up to dry before heading down to the kitchen. She made a simple rice porridge for breakfast and ate her portion standing up. The pot sat on the stove awaiting the others.

She considered going about her usual duties, but just the thought of dusting and sweeping made her feel tired. One day without wouldn't hurt. She went up to her room instead, pulled out her box of letters, and spent a moment staring at it. Then she shook her head and pushed it back into the corner. Not yet. She grabbed her journal instead and retreated to the reception area with it, unwilling to stay in close range of the tempting box.

She didn't feel like writing anything either, so she flipped through to an earlier page and began to read. It was an entry from a year back, and she'd written about almost getting caught out in a windstorm, even though she thought she'd read the weather accurately. She had theorised about it being a lesson never to get complacent, and how nature itself was willing to provide those reminders, and that perhaps it was a metaphor for how a Resonant ought never to become complacent about their anchors, about who and what they were. She'd been in an awfully philosophical mood back then. In retrospect, it was as embarrassing as her name was.

"Good morning."

Len glanced up, and smiled at Eira.

"Is breakfast ready, by any chance?" Eira asked, then held up her hands when Len made to get up. "It's all right, I can get it myself. Thanks."

Len sat back down and looked at her journal. Reading it had lost its appeal. Behind her, a chair scraped across the floor. A spoon clinked against a bowl. Len moved to the start of the journal to check the date. Two years ago. She didn't write often, but for this one to have lasted so long meant she'd been writing much less in recent years. When she'd first come here, she'd blazed through two journals in the first year. Of course, most of it had been sullen ramblings about how much she hated her parents and Maraoma and how terrible this place was and how much she wanted to go home. She'd never seen the hypocrisy back then.

She stroked the edge of the paper in contemplation. She had taught herself to like this place, so there was no hypocrisy to be found these days. There wasn't. She shook her head and turned to the entry she'd written the night before, scanning it again and thinking back to the moment she and Manny had found Eira. Still odd, but Manny wasn't up yet, and so her curiosity would have to wait to be sated.

"Hey, Len?" Eira asked.

Len glanced up.

"Manny mentioned you go out for walks, sometimes?"

Len nodded.

"Would it be okay if I came with you the next time you go out?" Eira rubbed the back of her neck. "I'm going a bit stir-crazy in here. I could use the chance to stretch my legs."

Len shrugged and pointed at the door with an inquisitive look. It wasn't her usual time for walks, but it was a good time to show off the place to Eira a little. If she was lucky, the light would be just about right.

"Now?" Eira brightened when Len nodded. "Yeah, sure."

Len held up a finger, and headed upstairs to return her journal to her room. She got out her hat and tied it on, then went back down. Eira was already waiting by the front door. She snapped her fingers to get Eira's attention, and pointed at her hat.

"Ah, good idea," Eira said. "Um. The stores?"

Len nodded. Eira retrieved a hat from the storeroom and secured it, then hurried back. Len held the door open for her. It was starting to get hotter, but it was still early enough that it wasn't unpleasant yet. They could get in a good hour's walk at least, before the heat drove them back indoors. It was never fun when Doc needed measurements taken at the height of day; Len had made a point of mapping out the quickest route between the sensors after the first time.

"Do you do this often?" Eira asked.

Len raised her hand and tilted it side to side. More often than Doc liked, and she got a lecture on safety and pragmatism now and then. Checking the sensors was one thing, since they were only just outside the shields, but her walks were another, given that Len liked to head some distance out. But she wasn't being as reckless as Doc thought she was; she'd studied the weather patterns in the region for months

before she'd ventured out on her first walk, and she only went out if the weather was mild. She took safe, circuitous routes that let her get back under Waystation shields in a hurry, which was how she'd survived the occasional misreading of the weather. She had no desire to have her skin scoured off by a sudden windstorm. Even Doc had given up on forbidding her, though she still didn't like the idea of it. Manny accompanied her on occasion, but had admitted to feeling too uneasy outside the shields to enjoy the walks as she did. Besides, his pale skin tended to burn rather than tan, even if he slathered on protective cream. For him, the chance to stretch out wasn't worth the hassle.

Eira seemed to have no qualms about leaving the shields, especially for one who had almost died in a windstorm mere days ago. That was either brave or stupid.

Len double-checked the horizon. Clear. The clouds rolled by, placid. Their speed was reassuring. She led Eira through the first set of shields, shut them behind her, and opened up the next set into the open land. Eira looked around curiously as Len led her towards the southerly dunes.

"I've never left the city before, you know," Eira said. "Not even those little hour-long tours they give so people can see what it's like outside a shield. It's real strange to see so much land just – out there."

Len turned just enough to give her a quizzical look.

"I mean, there's always things around in the city," Eira said. "Buildings and things. I don't know how it works in other cities, but we had buildings everywhere you turned in Tejara. You just didn't have such a big stretch of nothing. Or of just one thing. That was the hardest thing for me to get used to, back when I first set out with the caravan."

Len nodded. It was something many travellers experienced on their first journeys. Cities were so self-contained that those who left them were often shocked to realise how vast the planet was, and how tiny the place that had been their world was.

Even she had felt that same frightened awe when she'd first set out for the Waystation. She had been a mess of anger and betrayal and resentment at that point, but even so she had been forced into a terrified quiet when she'd first seen the horizon stretch out before her. That feeling had stayed with her throughout the

journey, and for months after. It had taken half a year to become accustomed to it, at least to the point where she was no longer startled when she looked out the windows of the Waystation. If Eira had never before left the cities, she would still be struggling to make sense of the world out here.

Halfway up a dune, Len stopped and gestured for Eira to look behind her. The small gasp Eira let out pleased her; she had always liked the sight of the Waystation when limned by afternoon light. At this distance, the translucent grey shell of the Waystation's shields caught and refracted the light in a dizzying rainbow. The staid old buildings behind the shields flickered in and out of view depending on the angle one stood at; there was the main residential building, and the one for the large machinery, and the one for caravan storage. They were boring rectangles of site-fabricated material up close, but at a distance, half-hidden by glimmering light, they looked like more than they were.

"Well, now," Eira said at last. "That's lovely."

It was also something that only happened at certain times of day. Most of the time, the shields were more opaque – a boring grey half-sphere, just like the boring grey buildings they sheltered. But the first time Len had seen this particular light phenomenon, she had felt as if even things that seemed uninteresting at first could have hidden depths to them.

She'd felt a little better about herself, then.

They moved on after a while. Len steered them away from the dune and onto an easterly track where the ground was marginally firmer and supported some plant-life. Eira was fascinated by the scraggly cottonweed, which was the only plant that grew in this part of the desert. Len knew that there were a few other species in other places, but the cottonweed was the only species that thrived on the sporadic acid rains that fell in the area. As a consequence, the entire plant was poisonous, and could kill a person in hours if eaten. It was what she'd done that one research project on; Doc had taught her how to extract the poison, and she'd written up a paper on its properties that Doc had insisted on being sent on with the next supply caravan. Len still didn't know what had happened to it. Afterwards, Doc had also taught her how to synthesise the antidote from the poison itself. The science behind it had gone a little over Len's head, but the procedure had been interesting to watch.

Doc claimed that the plant had in fact been named after a famous poisoner from centuries ago, but Len wasn't sure about that. It looked a little like cotton was supposed to have looked, with its fluffy tendril-like leaves. Before Doc had told her about the poisoner, Len had believed that its appearance was the reason for its name. She thought of sharing that knowledge with Eira, who was speculating on how the plant could survive in the desert, but she'd forgotten to bring her notebook with her, and in any case, she didn't want to open a dialogue with someone who would be leaving so soon.

They walked on. Eira fell quiet after a time. There wasn't much to talk about; sand, boulders, cottonweed. The sand hid fossils, but finding them was a matter of luck. Len knew that there were also some tiny, hardy insects that lived out here, but they only came out at night. At a glance, the desert looked all but dead.

"Question," Eira said, a while later. "Where's the Route track? In another direction?"

Len turned to point, drawing a line in the air, parallel to where the track lay.

"So that would mean Maraoma's in... that direction," Eira said, following Len's outstretched finger. She put a hand up to the brim of her hat as she stared westwards. Behind them, sand dunes turned the horizon into an undulating line, but ahead of them it was flat. It looked like the clouds had settled on the ground like a thick blanket being draped over a bed. "Say, have you ever been there?"

Len nodded, and Eira gave her a thoughtful look. "Were you from Maraoma?"

Another nod, slow and cautious.

"Ah, for some reason I thought you'd be from Bijali or Tanarat," Eira said.

Those two cities were closer than Maraoma, and Doc had in fact been born in Tanarat, though she had moved to Maraoma as a child. It was an easy mistake for someone to make. But Len wasn't quite comfortable labelling herself as being from Maraoma. She'd been born there, yes, but she'd spent longer here at the Waystation. Long enough that things must have changed from what she remembered in Maraoma. She had lived in a terraced house, the last in a row of them. The streets had been paved with an unassuming brown-grey rock, its uniformity giving away its birth in a printing facility. The house had been at the border of the leisure district, and once a week, she had gone to the park just across that border.

She wondered if any of that still existed.

“Do you think,” Eira said, picking her words with care, “that it’ll be – okay there?” She hesitated. “I mean, sometimes I think I’m being a fool. I – what if I can’t find a job there, or if they don’t accept me at all, and I have to move on? I don’t want to end up travelling for years to find a city that’s accepting newcomers.”

Len wished she had her notebook with her. It was impossible to comfort someone through charades. She knelt and drew clumsy letters in the sand, as Eira crouched beside her to read.

Maraoma always takes people. Large pop capacity. You’ll make it.

She thought that she should write more, but everything else that came to mind sounded trite. She glanced at Eira, and froze at the sweet smile cast her way.

“Thanks,” Eira said, then laughed. “Most days I feel like I can do anything, but now and then I get a little worried.”

Len looked away, and traced out two more words. *You can.*

She thought that Eira could do anything she set her mind to. Eira had that air of competence and determination about her, and even if she really did flag at times as she claimed, Len had no doubt that she always charged on ahead regardless. Len wasn’t like that, though. Len didn’t have the same confident nature. She would always worry about change, and about uncertainties, and her worries would keep her locked in place.

That was part of her. She had long since accepted that. Know yourself, the mantra of Resonants, and she knew this about herself, bone-deep, blood-deep. Some things couldn’t be fought against.

Chapter 3

Eira spent most of her time with Manny. Doc didn't allow anyone but Len in when she was working on her research, and Manny was of course easier to be around than Len was. Len did bring her out for one more walk, but otherwise, they didn't spend time alone together the way Eira and Manny did.

It seemed like Eira didn't mind Len's company, and she did try to draw Len into the conversation whenever she passed by, but Len's own awkwardness kept her making excuses to leave as soon as possible. Things might have continued on in that fashion until Eira left, but on the sixth day after her arrival, things changed.

It was Len's fault. Eira had only touched her shoulder to get her attention. It had been barely a second of innocent contact, nothing that deserved a pot lid to the face. Eira had ducked, so at least Len only had to suffer through the guilt of having thrown a heavy object at her, and not also the guilt of having injured her. Len didn't remember running out into the desert, and when she realised at last where she was, she had to backtrack to get to a safer spot. Running into the desert without thinking was a dangerous thing to do, and she was lucky a sudden storm hadn't come on her while she'd been caught out of position.

She retreated to a spot just outside the shields, circling around until she found one of her landmarks, a formation of three rocks. She sat down with her back to one. With the immediate fear having subsided, she was starting to feel foolish at her over-reaction. She was wrapped up in her treated clothes. A bodysuit covered her from neck to wrists to ankles, and socks and gloves covered her hands and feet. She had on a loose shirt and trousers over the bodysuit, and a lightweight jacket with a hood up over her head to shield her face. She was safe, and more to the point, Eira was safe. To react in such a violent fashion was ridiculous. No one had been in danger at any point, but no matter how much she told herself that, she still felt sickened at the thought of being touched.

She pushed the sensation aside and tried to think of something else.

The clouds were starting to change colour, from a bright yellow-orange to a darker shade of orange-red. Night was coming on; the sun beyond the clouds was setting. She wondered what that might look like. Pictures were well and good, but

how might the actual sun itself appear in real life? Would it be any different to the old pictures, salvaged from before the Great Strike, now displayed in museums?

She had a vague memory of going to the large museum in Maraoma once, when she was a child. She strained to remember. It would be a good distraction if only she could recall it. There had been a planetarium of sorts, demonstrating how far their ancestors had gotten with understanding what lay beyond the planet. Here are the planets and their moons; here are the systems they had mapped; here are the theories on how mankind might move off the planet. None of the theories had ever been put into practice, as far as the historians could tell. But it was a wonderful thought exercise. Then the Great Strike had put paid to any possibility of those thoughts being actualised. One asteroid had killed millions and altered the planet irrevocably. The survivors had more practical matters in mind at that point, and by the time anyone thought to salvage the more esoteric branches of knowledge – well, they'd lost a lot.

There had been a whole exhibit on the Great Strike, hadn't there? Or had it been part of the planetarium exhibit? She couldn't remember.

Once, so much had been known about the world beyond the planet. It was hard to imagine now. They had the research that had been done, but no way to replicate those experiments with their current level of technology. Their ancestors had not had to contend with present-day atmospheric conditions when conducting their research.

She thought of what stars might look like. She thought back to the framed photographs that had survived the Great Strike and all the upheaval that followed. A black sky – all right, she could imagine that, because the sky was dark at night even now. But pinpricks of light in the sky? That was harder to imagine. It looked pretty in the pictures, but no longer existed.

No, it did exist, but she was blind to it. The stars were still there, in all likelihood. Vast reaches of space between them, millions and millions of light-years, a distance she couldn't imagine even with the metaphors and models the museum had laid out. Had she thought the plains were immense? As a baby, her home had been her world. As a child, it was her district-ring at first, and then parts of the rest of the city. As a Waystation employee, she knew the world was larger than she had thought.

But in truth, it was even more than that, and she was an insignificant thing with an insignificant ability. She could destroy everything in her reach and she would not have touched even a fraction of what was out there. She was nothing.

She was philosophising again, was what she was doing. Nothing good could come of that.

She pulled off her glove and laid her bare hand on the rock. *Let it remain*, she thought. *I have no use for it*. Her hand sank into the rock in increments, until she lifted it away. A clear handprint was carved into its surface. She frowned and passed her hand over the surrounding area until it had smoothed down to become even with the handprint. She wiped her hand over the whole thing once more until the handprint had vanished, then shook out her hand and put her glove back on. The rock looked a little smaller than usual, and now she had to contend with the peculiar sensation of being full of energy, yet unwilling to do anything about it.

She sighed and lay back against the rock. By her reckoning, she could control her Resonance about half the time. But that wasn't a good enough number for her to feel comfortable removing her total skin coverage. She didn't know why her Resonance was so unpredictable.

Doc might be able to tell her, but she didn't like talking about it with people – much less a scientist – much less a scientist who had worked with her father. “Deconstruction ability,” she told her colleagues, but kept the details to herself. Most of those who had come and gone thought she was like those who worked in construction and geological surveys, who could sense fault lines and assist catastrophic failure along them. She never told the travellers anything, of course. And Eira counted as a traveller, as she would be leaving with the next caravan that would take her.

But now she owed Eira an explanation, if she hadn't already gotten one from Manny. That would be one more person who knew about her, and worse, who was going to Maraoma with that knowledge. She supposed she could request her silence on the matter. She hoped Eira would agree.

She would first have to find the courage to return, though. She wasn't at all certain about that happening soon. Or at all. Embarrassment made her cheeks and

ears hot every time she thought about it. She'd thrown a pot lid at Eira. A bloody pot lid!

The sky was darkening fast. Beyond the enshrouding clouds, the sun must have vanished from sight.

"I'm sorry," Eira said from behind her, and Len swallowed a shriek. "Oh. And sorry again. I didn't mean to startle you."

Len twisted round and looked up at Eira, who was standing a few feet away, silhouetted against the steady white lights embedded into the Waystation's shields. Len couldn't make out her expression. She scrambled to her feet, fingers twisting in the hem of her shirt.

"Manny said that you've got a Resonance," Eira said.

Len stared at the ground.

"Something to do with deconstruction, he said," she went on. "He said you've had some bad experiences with it, so you prefer not to be touched. That's all he told me."

That was nice of him. It was an explanation, but not in any more detail than Len would have liked to give. Len had told him more than she'd told anyone, so he knew the kind of accident she was afraid would recur, even if he didn't know the conditions under which the first one had happened.

"So I'm sorry, I didn't realise." Eira's feet shuffled back and forth. "It's a bad habit of mine, I get physically affectionate with my friends, you know? But I'll make sure I don't do it with you anymore. I never meant to make you uncomfortable."

Len's gut twisted and she shook her head. She wanted her notebook. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Her heart pushed blood up into her face, thump-ba-thump, filling her ears and making her eyes blur.

"You don't have to apologise."

The lights that made her a shadow to Len were in turn lighting Len up to Eira's eyes. Len shifted in discomfort at the feeling of exposure, but shook her head again before chancing a glance up at Eira. She still couldn't see a thing.

Eira laughed. "All right, fine. Apology accepted. Will you accept mine?"

Len nodded at once.

“Then come back inside.” Eira She giggled all of a sudden. “Manny offered to cook dinner but Doc threatened him with bodily harm if he did. You have to come back if only to save him from her.”

Her lips twitched, and she followed Eira back to the Waystation.

Of course, it wasn't that easy. Doc kept giving her sharp looks, but didn't push. Manny and Eira were both solicitous of her, which was strange and made her feel quite odd about the whole thing, so she fled to the kitchen to cook a late dinner. She made a quick stir-fry over rice, which got compliments despite her hurried job. Afterwards, everyone drifted off for the night without a single comment on what she had done. She'd expected the space from Manny and it seemed like Eira had taken her cue from him, but it was a surprise that Doc allowed the matter to slide. She had never done so before.

Len went to her room and tore off a piece of paper from her notebook. On it, she wrote a proper apology. When she gave it to Eira, that strange woman just laughed and told her to sleep well.

She didn't. She fell asleep almost as soon as she got into bed, but her sleep was restless and she dreamt of things she didn't want to remember. A familiar face faded into sight, gaining clarity and presence as the dream-memory continued. He lay on a metal table, a cloth covering his body so that all she could see was his face and neck. Brown skin with an unhealthy ashiness to it. A weak jaw, exaggerated by the way the skin sagged around the neck. Thin, dark hair, cut short but still unable to hide its curl. Closed eyes. Her hand, small and trembling, was on his cheek. Beneath her fingers, his skin began to dissolve. The effect crawled up and down his face. Fat and muscle peeked through and began to vanish under the small hand on his cheek. She tried to pull away but found that she couldn't. Her hand seemed rooted in place, sinking into bloody muscle with a sickening squish. The skin of his eyelids vanished, and his eyeballs stared at her. He had dark brown eyes, like her own. *Well done*, a deep voice said from behind her, and she was at last able to pull her hand back. She turned and looked up into cat's eyes. Her fingers were tacky and stuck together when she curled them into a fist. *Well done indeed. Now, let's get you cleaned up.* She woke, shuddering with tears, and curled up on herself.

After a time, she crawled out from under her blanket and got to her feet. She tiptoed out of her room and into the bathrooms, where she washed her face. It was unnecessary, since her Resonance had already dissolved the tears the moment they had spilled from her eyes. But the cool water felt good nonetheless, and she felt a little more aware as she returned to her room.

She collected her journal and went downstairs. Her eyes were heavy with exhaustion but she refused to go back to sleep. Not yet. Instead, she sat sideways on the couch, putting her feet up on the seat and using her thighs as a table.

259th day of the year 127, she wrote. She put the end of her pen between her lips and thought for a moment before continuing.

Had a nightmare. It's been a while since such a vivid dream drove me out of my bed. Likely caused by unexpected physical contact earlier in the evening. It was only for a moment, which seems to make it clear that even such a minor incident could prove to be a major setback. I'm considering asking Doc if she has suggestions on how I may overcome my aversion to touch even when wearing protective clothing. I know I've been getting worse over time – or not worse, precisely, but more and more reluctant to try. I always seem able to talk myself out of it, almost without trying. As if that's what I default to, as if it's become an automatic reaction even though I don't want it to be one. I want to be in control of my reactions, instead of the other way around. In that case, I'll have to overcome my usual distaste for the matter and consult Doc on the best way forward. She'll no doubt suggest some form of psychotherapy. She keeps making noise about exposure therapy and EMDR whenever I've had a particularly bad time of it. I may not like it, but this really is getting intolerable. I can feel myself slipping away.

In the meantime, therefore, the usual mantra: know yourself.

The name I have taken is Len. When I was six, my Resonance manifested. When I was eight, I was betrayed by my father. When I was nine, I was rescued. When I was ten, I was sent to this Waystation in order to remove me from the reaches of those who would return me to that situation. I have lost my family through their choices, but I may yet find a new one of my choosing. I am now twenty-five and have been living at this Waystation since my arrival. My current colleagues are Manny (Lee

Adam) and Doc (Sanju Rao), with whom I have reached an accord. My life is now calm and settled, and I do not wish for it to change.

She re-read the last line and frowned, a sense of disquiet filling her. It was what she always wrote in her journal after a bad attack, or nightmare. It anchored her in the present and made her relax. But this time it felt like a lie.

There was no reason for that feeling. She glanced over the entry again, then put a quivering pen to paper once more.

I wonder if I should not add more to this stock paragraph of mine. It seems too little. Too unimportant. Does it say anything about me, really? – About the me that keeps remembering what it was like to be little and loved and ignorant, about the me that thinks about living in a city again, about the me that has to keep saying that my life is good because it's the only way I can keep from going mad.

There was no reason for that feeling. She shoved it away and glanced over the entry again. She wanted to write more, but exhaustion was creeping back up on her. It was annoying. She'd once been able to stay up so much later without consequence. Twenty-five was too young to be suffering from lack of sleep. And she was most certainly too young to be thinking, ah, to be young again. She sighed and leaned her head against the arm of the couch. She shouldn't have taken youthful stamina for granted, back when she'd had it. She hadn't expected to already be flagging at twenty-five.

Though of course, as a child, she had never been able to picture herself past the age of twenty.

She had never wanted to run for the wind; she had always had a healthy desire to live. Yet, when she pictured her future, her imagination stalled at that age and would not go further. Back then, it had not been a problem, for there were plenty of things she could imagine in the interim. As she had approached twenty, however, her time had seemed to her to be growing shorter and shorter, and she had become apprehensive.

But twenty had come and gone, and she was still alive.

It was distressing. She knew of no one else who could not see their future, who didn't know what they wanted, who had no clear ambitions or desires. Doc had her research; Manny wanted to see how far he could take his ability; Eira wanted to

make something of herself in Maraoma. Her previous colleagues had all been working towards something concrete. Even in books, characters always seemed to know what they wanted, and if they experienced any doubt, it was only until the one thing that they were truly meant for came along. It seemed so nice, to have that clarity of thought. That direction. She had none of it, and she felt quite alone in her lack. At least she had the safety and familiarity of the Waystation to comfort her. The only problem was the small disruption that Eira had caused.

That vague discomfort she'd felt since Eira's arrival had resolved itself into something clearer, and even more disquieting. A peculiar thought intruded on Len's thoughts. What if, she thought, she found more of a purpose outside of the Waystation? What if being here had stunted her ability to see more for herself? What if, what if.

She tried to put the thought from her mind. Eira might have been the catalyst for these strange ideas, but there was no reason for Len to pay them any heed. Once Eira left, they would settle too, and Len could return to her quiet life. Things would go back to normal.

What if she didn't want them to?

The Waystation had never been cleaner. At least her anxieties were fruitful in one way.

There was, however, a limit to how much she could clean the common areas. Once everything had been dusted and swept and washed, with close attention given to every minute detail, she was forced to retreat to her room. There, she attempted to read a book, failed, and instead began to tidy up her already-tidy room.

She dusted everything, swept up the floor, then decided she would reorganise her belongings. The bedding took up almost the whole floor when unrolled, so it was best to keep it where it was, rolled up by the wall opposite the door when not in use. The shelf was built into the wall, so it would have to stay there, and since she also used it as a table, her journals and clock and such would also remain in place. The wardrobe was also built into the wall, overhanging the foot of her bed, behind the door. There was nothing to be done about it.

She studied her room in dismay. So much for reorganising. Perhaps she could go through her wardrobe, at the very least, and check the condition of her clothes. With any luck, something would need mending.

She opened the wardrobe, and reached up to sift through the clothes hanging there. She didn't have much. She'd never felt the need for a lot, especially since the only clothing qualities that mattered out here were hardiness and protection against heat. There were a few plain shirts, a few plain trousers, and one plain jacket for those rare nights when it got cold. More than anything, there were bodysuits and socks and gloves, all made from material treated to remain intact on her. They were lightweight, which was good as far as comfort went, but bad as far as being long-lasting went. She'd taken to ordering them in bulk, after the first time she'd developed a tear in her suit and had tried to patch it up. The thread wasn't treated, so it had dissolved on contact with her skin. She'd learned her lesson, and these days, ensured that she had a ready supply of both suits and treated thread on hand.

But there were no tears or weak spots visible, so she put the last of the bodysuits away with a sigh. She reached for the gloves, then paused.

The small box sat at the bottom of the wardrobe. Her fingers trembled as she reached for it.

The letters arrived with every supply run. She put them away unopened, unwilling to read them, yet equally unwilling to destroy them. She had thought, at first, that the flow of letters would cease if she did not respond. But it had been years and still they came, one with each supply run.

Now and then, she took them out to consider destroying them. She looked at them for a while, studied the plain envelopes and the familiar neat print across the front, noted the way in which the envelopes were yellowed and crinkled at the edges from too much time tucked away in a drawer. Then she put them back, and refused to look at them for another few months, until she began to think a little too much once more of her childhood and her parents. It was a pattern she had been content with, one that needed no alteration.

Two runs ago, for the first time since her arrival, she hadn't received a letter. She had told herself that she couldn't expect punctuality every time, and in any case, she had no desire for contact and therefore should not even be expecting a letter. The

letter that had come prior to that run had been far thinner than its brethren, and addressed in a looping cursive that had made her breath catch. This past supply run, a few weeks before Eira's arrival, had brought with it another envelope carrying that cursive.

Something had happened. She knew it had, but she wasn't sure she wanted to know what it was.

She opened the box and took out the envelopes one by one, laying them out in the order she'd received them. When they were all ordered, she studied the forty envelopes arrayed before her. Her arms were wrapped around her knees, drawing them up against her chest. Her fingers were gripping so hard that they had long since stopped hurting, and moved on to numbness. The envelopes looked up at her, waiting.

It took deliberate effort to unclench one hand, finger by finger, joint by joint, and to reach out and pick up the second to last envelope. She forced her other hand to join its partner, and peeled open the envelope with trembling fingers. There was only a single piece of paper in it.

My dear daughter, read the salutation.

She put the letter down, then tucked her face against her knees and squeezed her eyes shut. Her face felt hot and the air felt stale and her chest felt tight. She gulped down a breath and curled in on herself. She wanted to be angry, she wanted to be furious at his audacity, but instead all she felt was a shivering resignation and overwhelming sorrow. She wanted to be his dear daughter. She wanted him to be the father she'd thought he was, before things had gone wrong. And there was the anger, burning low and slow beneath it all; there was the resentment that he had, after all, not been her dear father.

After a time, she took a deep breath and straightened out. She wiped her face and picked up the letter again. This time, she was able to read it straight through. It was short, and though he had seemed to be attempting to keep his words polite and undemanding, his emotions bled through nonetheless. Your mother is dead, his cursive cried. My wife is dead. I thought you ought to know. I will be holding off on the ceremonies until the next run returns to Maraoma, in case you wish to pay your respects. If I do not hear from you, I will proceed to return her ashes to the earth. But

she had not read the letter, and she had not responded, and her mother was now returned.

Len lay back against her half-folded bed and stared up at the ceiling for a while.

Then she flung herself upright and snatched up the very first letter, tearing it open and pulling out the sheaves of paper in it. Her mother's handwriting greeted her, and she pressed down the ache in favour of reading it through. Then she moved on to the next, and the next, and the next, till at last she had read every letter she had received over the past fifteen years, and her heart was full of some uncomfortable, unnamed emotion.

She returned all the letters to their envelopes, stacked the envelopes in a bundle, and put them away. She unfolded her bed and lay down, trying to remember what her childhood bedroom had looked like. The window was across from the door, and the desk was set in front of it. The bed was next to the other wall, and she had a bookcase next to that. Her wardrobe was across from her bed. The walls were a pale cream and the ceiling was white, both colours selected by her parents who hadn't been enamoured of her suggestion of purple. Her floors were a pale blonde wood. Her furniture was all wood as well, but in myriad different shades that gave her room an eclectic look she loved. And she had a tiny bed-side table, she remembered, just big enough to put her box of treasures, and her stuffed rabbit, and whichever book she was reading at the moment. She liked to read in bed, sitting at its foot so that she could read in the natural light that filtered through her window instead of having to turn on her room light. Her light was a central one in the middle of her ceiling, and there was an air purifier installed right above the window. Oh, it had been comfortable in her little room, and though she still liked to read in bed, it wasn't quite the same at the Waystation. It was missing something that she didn't dare name.

She fell asleep with an ache in her chest, and dreamed of her bedroom. She was a child, sitting at her desk and drawing a picture of her family. One woman, one man, one girl, all holding hands and smiling. She picked it up and hopped off her chair to show it to her parents. But the door to her room wouldn't open, and neither would her window, and no matter how loud she screamed, no one came to let her out.

The next day, she woke early and hurried to get breakfast ready. She then abandoned all her remaining chores and left the Waystation before anyone else could come down and see her. She wore lightweight clothes and a hat, in case she didn't return before the heat started building up.

She walked out past the caravan storage, curving around the back of that building and continuing in a straight line. She opened one shield and closed it behind her, then the other. Stepping out, she was greeted by a rush of hot wind. She checked the horizon on instinct, and noted the turbulent clouds in the distance. Four hours, if that. She would follow the Route track so that she didn't have to focus on direction, and return in three hours at most, well before the windstorm hit. For now, she needed to think, and being in the Waystation made that hard. Its walls meant safety, of course they did, but that made it difficult to consider certain things.

What she wanted to evaluate was anything but safe. It flew in the face of her knowledge of herself. It probably wasn't a smart idea, especially for one who still didn't have control over their ability. But she had to think of the ramifications nonetheless, or it would sit and fester in her soul.

Her mother was dead.

She raked her fingers through her ponytail. She didn't need her mother to do up her hair for her anymore. But the thought that the option no longer existed made her queasy.

She shouldn't be upset by it. It had been so long since she'd seen her mother, and the last time had been full of bitterness at not having been protected by her. That was what mothers were supposed to do. But her mother had failed her by not realising what the monster she'd married was doing. Or by being wilfully blind to it. Len had never known which of the two it had been, and now she would never get an answer. She shouldn't feel this way – but she wanted to cry for what she had lost. She swallowed through the ache in her throat and kept plodding forward.

Her mother had sent an envelope with every supply run, up until her death. Each of the packets had contained several letters, written days or weeks apart. She had written about things that Len had never known. She had written things that made Len worry about letting go of her anger against one or both of her parents.

That anger formed the core of her being. It was the kernel around which she had formed herself. To give it up meant re-evaluating herself, and she didn't know if she could do that without losing her way and being destroyed by her ability.

Your daddy and I will make sure those people can never be a danger to you again, her mother had written, in one of her first letters. We are still considering what to do. It's hard because they're well-known in the Institute, so I'm sure a lot of people won't want to believe what they did. But we're not going to let them get away with it just because you're out of their reach now. We want you to come back, after all! Your daddy's been moping since you left, and I'm not any better. We miss you so much, but we have to make it safe here for you before you come back. So be a good girl for now and listen to what the people there say, okay? We checked everyone who'll be at the Waystation, and they're all good people. Kishu has children of her own so she'll take care of you during the trip there. If she has to leave before you for any reason, we'll make sure we send someone else trustworthy to look after you. Be my brave little girl. Amma loves you.

Amma loves you. Len crossed her arms over her chest, slowing but continuing to walk down the Route track. She remembered when she hadn't doubted that statement. She remembered when she had trusted her father. But how was she supposed to accept such ridiculous things like 'your daddy misses you' and 'Amma loves you' when the memories of being put through horrifying experiments were seared into her?

She had killed a man at her father's behest. She hadn't wanted to, but he had made her even though she cried and cried and cried. Her only consolation, in hindsight, was that the man must have been sedated, for he didn't thrash or scream as his body dissolved under her hands.

Her mother had smiled that morning, as she and her father had left the house. Amma loves you.

She shivered and stopped for a moment, taking a deep breath. This wasn't the place for an attack. It came on nonetheless. A distant part of her brain watched in cool disdain as the rest of her shook and gasped. After it passed, she remained sitting on the ground for a few minutes. The clouds were roiling in the distance. She got up

and brushed off her clothes, then turned and began to head back the way she'd come.

Letter upon letter, describing all the things that the two of them had been up to. Their campaigning and its effects. The careful tip-toeing around the details of what they had done to 'those people,' which must have been the people who'd helped her father. No comments on what her father himself had done, but every letter ended with an affirmation that she was missed and loved by both her parents.

It might be that her mother didn't know. Had never known, even until her death. She pitied the woman who'd been so deceived, but she also resented the blindness that had allowed her to be tortured.

But the worst thing – the very worst thing of all, was the last envelope she'd received, from her father. It made her burn with emotions she couldn't put into words. She didn't think she would ever be able to do so, however long she spent reflecting on it.

A part of her wanted to see him. Meet him face-to-face. Hear the words from him, and judge him thereafter. Another part screamed at that reckless desire, and yet another thought, *what if*.

By the time she returned to the Waystation, she was certain that her mother had been ignorant, and that she might one day forgive her that ignorance. She was still all muddled up about what to do with her father's words. She went through one shield, then the next, and trundled back to the main building. She nodded in response when Manny and Eira greeted her, and headed upstairs without otherwise engaging with them.

She shook out her hat and clothes in the laundry area, and took a moment to breathe. Then she returned downstairs to prepare lunch. It wasn't soothing, as it usually was. She made a stew, because that was hard to ruin even when she couldn't concentrate. She stirred it and wondered how to determine if a risk was worth taking.

Outside, the storm hit.

After a few hours, it became obvious that the storm would not peter out any time soon. It was one of those unexpected squalls that had been the cause of many deaths back in the early days, when people were still getting accustomed to living out in the Waystations. But they had gotten used to it since. There were protocols in place

to guide even newcomers as to what should be done. Besides, on a personal level, Len had lived through so many of these storms that they no longer fazed her.

The first one must have been scary, but she had long ago forgotten her reaction.

For as long as the storm continued, she and Manny would check all the weak points twice a day, morning and night, to be sure that nothing was in danger of failing. There was a checklist for them to tick off. Eight air filtration points at each shield, and another twelve around the building. Shield integrity, especially where the materials were aged. Checks on the converter, generators, and purifier, to ensure that none of them were in danger of failure. The backups would only last so long, after all.

After dinner that evening, when they started the first round of checks, they found that one air filter had already clogged up. Len left Manny to clear the block, and brought the filter screen to the laundry area to wash. There, she found Eira, who was scrubbing at a shirt with a mindless intensity that suggested she'd been at it for a while.

Len twisted and released the doorknob. It snapped around with a sharp metallic clatter. Eira jumped, then smiled when she saw Len. There was something tight and wild about the expression. Len put the filter screen in the large sink, and gave Eira an enquiring look.

"Oh, it's nothing," Eira said.

Len leaned against the sink and crossed her arms.

Eira held out for a moment longer, then dropped the shirt with a groan. "How do you put up with it?" she asked, gesturing at the wall. Or at the storm that screamed around them, beyond the wall. "It's driving me mad."

Len shook her head in pitying amusement, and pulled out her notebook to write. *It will probably last at least a day more.*

Eira gave her a despairing look. "No."

Len nodded. *You get used to it after a while. We've got good shields, and Manny's able to pick up any problems before they can cause real damage. You're safe here.*

"I'm not scared," Eira insisted. "I'm just tired of the sound already. Another day's going to drive me mad."

Len shrugged.

“I might have to live with it, but I don’t have to like it,” Eira muttered. She returned to hand-washing her shirt, fingers scraping into the material. Len watched her for a moment, then turned her attention to the filter screen.

Not scared? Liar.

They were safe behind the Waystation shields, but Eira had just a few days ago been through a windstorm that she hadn’t had a shield for. The sounds would be reminding her of that. The distant ping-thud-crack of sand and gravel bouncing off the shields would make her recall the squelch-thump-smack of sand and gravel smacking into her body. The shrieking wind that spun around them would sound that much louder to Eira’s ears, overlaid as it was with the days-ago wind that could have killed her.

There was nothing to be done about it. There was some sound dampening insulation in the walls, but it didn’t do much against a storm of this intensity. Eira would, as she said, have to live with it.

It was an uncomfortable thought. Len rinsed off the filter screen and hung it up to dry, then nodded to Eira and left the laundry area. She went to the supply room, retrieved a new filter screen, and headed back outside with it.

“I think I’ve about got it,” Manny said by way of greeting, offering her a brush. “Have a look?”

She peered into the intake, then ran the brush through it. It went in without resistance. She returned it to Manny and began putting back together the parts they’d taken apart. Manny handed her the tools as she needed them, careful never to let their hands touch. There was a reason she preferred his company over Doc’s, even if she’d known Doc for longer.

In her kinder moments, she admitted that Doc was trying to push her out of her comfort zone, and that Doc’s gestures indicated some level of trust in Len. After all, Doc knew exactly what Len had once done with her ability, and yet she still showed no hesitation whenever she reached out to touch her. Len had to appreciate that, even as she did her best to dodge the friendly touches. But it was still difficult to deal with, especially on the bad days.

Kishu warned us that she's ready to leave soon, so we've been running around trying to find someone to go out and look after you, one of her mother's letters had read. We've found someone who's willing, though she's warned us that she's not very accustomed to children, so she does not know how well she can care for you. Still, though she might come off as distant at first, Sanju really does have a good heart and I trust her to look out for you and protect you. She was dreadfully angry about all that happened to you, and is quite determined to see you recover, you see.

That was more than Kishu Aunty or Doc herself had said about Doc's presence at the Waystation. Kishu Aunty had introduced her to Doc, said "You can ask her anything if you need to," and gone on her way. Doc had said hello, added that she was there on behalf of Len's parents, and asked if there was anything specific Len wanted to know. She hadn't seemed to know what to make of Len's refusal. She hadn't seemed to know much of anything about dealing with a child, in fact, and had in the end taken to treating Len as a small adult. It had oddly improved their relationship. When Doc had first come, Len had been determined to have nothing to do with her – but afterwards, the strange sort of respect she got from Doc made her a little more willing to listen. It helped that when Doc found out about Len's attacks, she didn't huff and tell her she was being silly like the doctor before had. Instead, she'd soothed her during and after each attack, and taught her breathing and meditation techniques to help mitigate the attacks to some degree. Even Len's current regime of physical exercise and mental learning was thanks to Doc's suggestion that having something else to focus on would be beneficial.

Really, given all that Doc had done for her, Len should forgive her the occasional high-handedness and questions about when Len was going to return to Maraoma. Suppressing a sigh, Len slotted the last piece in and pushed the unit into place. She double-checked her work, then touched the button that released the outer panel so that air would once more come through. After watching it for a few moments, Manny hummed in satisfaction.

"It's good," he said.

Len pulled out her notebook. *Eira might not be dealing well with the storm,* she wrote. *She didn't say anything, but I'm worried.*

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Manny assured her. He started packing up the tools and shooed her away when she made to help. “Go on, I’ve got this. You’ve done enough today.”

Len gave him a smile and returned to the Waystation. She went up to her room to retrieve a change of clothes. A shower sounded nice. She didn’t need them the way others did, to stay clean, but there was still a clear psychological benefit in having a hot shower. It would clear her mind and settle her turbulent thoughts. It would mellow out her worrying. Manny would take care of Eira, and if the thought made something twist inside her – well, that wasn’t important. Let the water wash it all away.

Interlude I

My dear daughter,

I hope that you have been doing well. As I have not heard from you, I have gone to return your mother's ashes to the earth. I do not know if you are aware of how this is normally handled; certainly it is not the sort of thing that one pays attention to until the need for it arises. A brief explanation, therefore, if it is something you wish:

After the cremation, the family may choose to keep the urn or return the ashes to the earth. As you know, our religion prefers the latter. The urn is therefore placed in a columbarium for safe-keeping until the next funeral run, of which there are four each year. On these runs, the urns are brought to a location away from the city, where the ashes are scattered. A prayer is said over the ashes. The families need not accompany the urns; all is done for them, and so once the urn has been placed in the columbarium, the families' responsibilities end.

I confess, however, that I took the other option available – that is, I accompanied the funeral run. Not many choose to do so as it does involve some degree of discomfort and danger in travelling the desert. I felt, however, that I could not give the right to hold your mother's ashes to anyone else. To you, certainly, but not to a stranger. I wished to return her to the earth with my own hands. It is somewhat selfish of me, of course, but I believe that it is a selfishness that you must understand.

*It was a short journey; only two weeks long. The story goes that in this place, the cloud cover is at its thinnest, and therefore souls that wish to depart for the Beyond find it easiest to break through at this place. For that reason, this location is referred to as *The Crossing*. In rather more practical terms, however, I believe that the location was truly chosen after studying wind-flow patterns. There are no constant winds that would carry the ashes back to Maraoma at this place. Even if this was not the case, of course the shields and air purifiers would prevent any accidental inhalation of our relatives – but logic does not always work in the face of fear or superstition.*

And there is, of course, something very disconcerting about inhaling ashes. The wind blew your mother's ashes into my face when I scattered them. It upset me at the

time, but I would now like to believe that she was laughing at me. It is a fanciful thought, I know. Your mother always brought that out in me. It is the main reason I noticed her at the start, and never stopped noticing her.

This will make more sense to you if you have an understanding of how I grew up, and the forces that shaped me. I was what they would call a solemn child. I was not given to noisy excesses. The truth is that I was a late surprise to my parents, and not an entirely welcome one. My mother was getting on in years by that point, and my father worked as a track serviceman, so he was rarely home to help. The youngest of my siblings was ten years older than me, and we had little in common. Three of my siblings were menial workers and my oldest brother was estranged for reasons no one would explain to me. I came to accept that no one had much attention to spare for the young accident that I was. I do not mean that my family was abusive or even neglectful – but my overwhelming memory of my childhood is that we were poor and tired. Always tired.

I determined early on, therefore, that I would not be either. I sought refuge in books and learning, in working out which path I would take in order to support myself in a better lifestyle when I reached adulthood. I had just about decided that I would go into government research when my mother died.

It must have been months before the news even reached my father. By the time he returned, I had been made my brother's ward, and remained thus. Do you remember your Uncle Luka? As it turns out, the reason he was estranged from the family was because he had the audacity to take up with another man. To be quite honest, I had not considered the possibility at that point – but I was also disinterested in romantic entanglements altogether at the time. Our neighbours had frequent rows and the best I ever saw of a couple was polite indifference. Your Uncle Luka and Uncle Dinesh were my first encounter with a loving and respectful couple.

In many ways, it was formative, though I had not the presence of mind to understand it then. All I knew was that I wanted that for myself, too. I wanted someone who would understand, support, and educate me in the same way that Luka and Dinesh did for each other. I also decided, in an abstract sort of way, that I wanted a child. I was certain that I would be a better parent than my own had been to me.

In this, I do not think I have done as well as I ought to have, and I beg your forgiveness for that. I wished to protect you from the uncaring world outside our doors, but in the attempt, I overlooked the wolves I had invited into the living room.

I was incredibly naive back then. Not just as a child, but well into adulthood. From a young age, I had found solace in scientific theory and the comforting pattern of logic and reason that formed it. As an adult, that sense of rightness became a sort of superior disdain for others who did not see its beauty. Even meeting your mother did not cure me entirely. She was equally intelligent in her field, and so I do believe that I saw her as fit to join me in my elevated position, rather than realising that the only elevation was in my own mind. This despite the fact that what captivated me about her was her refusal to take anything too seriously. On our very first meeting at a think-tank conference, she teased me terribly about how stiff and unyielding I was about my beloved science, about my status, about the way I presented myself and was perceived.

Your Uncle Luka did his best with me, but I was already fifteen when he took me in and though he opened my eyes in many ways, he had little time before I moved out in which to break certain bad habits of mind that I had fallen into. I am sorry to say that I did not grow out of my condescension until many years later – your mother unintentionally changed me by virtue of presenting an alternative I had never considered. It did not help, I am sure, that I got a job at the Institute on my first application. It was proof to me then that I deserved to be considered above the plebeians. Even within the Institute, I scorned those I saw to be political animals, smarming their way to the top.

Of course, I had no trouble discussing scientific research with my colleagues, but the sort of socialising and glad-handing that one needed in order to advance was quite beyond me. Or rather, I thought that I was beyond it; that it was a type of politicking that I would not lower myself to, that I would be able to hold myself aloft in the realm of pure science, untouched by such crudities.

Now I know what an arrogant line of thought that was. It is true that I held myself apart from politics as much as I could. But it does not follow that I was therefore somehow an impartial observer of events. I have come to believe that so long as one lives within a community, one is both subject to and participant of that

community's internal politics at the very least. Even choosing not to say or do something is a choice that affects people; silence can have far greater consequences than one might think.

Gaining Resonance has had a tremendous impact on my views. It has, shall we say, smashed the pedestal I put myself up on and proven that pedestal to be a flimsy, hollow thing. Before that, I had just about everything and was even beginning to soften somewhat in my previously inflexibility. I had worked my way into an excellent job; I was earning top-tier wages; I had a lovely wife and a lovely household; I was well-respected and held in great esteem by my peers.

But after? Ah, people do show their true colours then, don't they? My privileges were quite taken apart by virtue of my becoming a Resonant, and it was only in their vanishing that I realised I had ever had them. It is the greatest pity that those who have, never know the extent of what they have. Yet my position and renown continue to shield me to some extent – their only flaw is that they no longer have the strength to shield my family as well.

To that end, I broke my silence.

It has been years now and still there is so much left to do. We have made some strides in protecting Resonant rights, but in other areas we as a society remain horrendously callous. There are far too many gaps for a Resonant to fall through; there are far too few choices available to Resonants. I dread to think of how many people could be taken advantage of.

None of that prevents me from wanting to see you. If you have refused to consider your mother's pleas all this while, I cannot hope that you would see your way to granting mine. Nonetheless, I must make it. I believe that it is safer for you now; that the law would truly protect you should anyone make any untoward attempts towards you. Will you not come home? A second-hand account of you can never be so satisfying as seeing you in person once more must be. If I have missed out seeing you grow up, I hope that you will at least let me see the fine young woman you have become.

Your Uncle Luka advised me to write sincerely and openly without attempting to censor myself, but though the truth is that there is nothing I want more than to see

you, I find I cannot press too much on this point. Come if you are comfortable; I shall never force you.

I shall close this letter here. As first letters go, I hope that this does not fall too short of the mark. Your mother was always the one to write to you, though I did read her letters before she sent them on. She even added a few comments at my request, from time to time. Without her as go-between, I am certain that my words must be awkward and stilted – but I am determined nonetheless to keep up the tradition she began. I shall write you at least one letter every month, so that you receive four letters on each run. It is hardly my first venture away from scientific reports, though it is my first foray into this brand of personal honesty. Of course, that is nothing less than you deserve, and I shall endeavour to remain truthful in this manner.

Love,

Daddy

There had been seven letters in total.

Chapter 4

She was angry.

It was a feeling that was so familiar as to be comfortable. Look at him talking as if protecting her was the most important thing on his mind – when he'd been the one to deliver her to her tormentors. Where had all that protectiveness been when he'd laughed and joked with his fellows, and sent her off with them with the injunction to listen and be good?

She tried pacing the short length of her room, but it was so tiny that she barely got four strides in before having to turn around. She kept at it nonetheless, until her feet slowed and she found herself standing motionless in the centre of her room, arrested by a queer thought.

I'll be a little longer, since I have to finish this up. Why don't you go with Uncle Raj first? He'll show you around. That'll be more interesting than watching me tap away at my computer, hm?

You had fun with Uncle Raj? That's good. If I have work to do and he's free, you can go with him from now on.

Ah, Uncle Raj is here. Go on, I'll just finish this up and join you. Shouldn't be more than an hour.

She'd once enjoyed spending time with that man. He'd been good at the game; at gaining her confidence and luring her step by step into the position he wanted. By the time she'd begun to realise that something was odd about his insistence that she use her Resonance, he'd had her quite where he wanted her – afraid to protest, afraid to argue, afraid to speak out. After all, there was no one else she could plead to. Her father had agreed to these experiments. *He's a busy man, kiddo. Do you really want to bother him with your complaining? You've got to learn that sometimes people just have to buckle down and get to work, even if they don't like it. That's how societies work. The whole country would fall apart if people didn't do what they were meant to. Now here's a thing you're meant to do, and you're lucky to know it so young. And you're whining about it! Your parents would be disappointed if they knew – no, don't pretend to cry, you know it's true. All right, all right. Look. I*

won't tell them, won't say a thing about you being difficult. Let's just get on with it now and we'll call it even.

There we go, that's a lot better. You're getting the hang of it. No, I don't think we're quite ready to show your parents yet – we can get you even better at it, I'm sure of that. It'll be a nice surprise for them, won't it? Be sure you don't let it slip beforehand. Let's try this one more time. Can you dissolve this plant?

It's only a little beetle – there's nothing to be afraid of. It's already dead. There, just so – hold it in your hand. My, that was faster than usual. Didn't like touching it, did you. Heh.

I wonder what else you're capable of deconstructing, kid. That's going to need some further analysis. Hm? No, your father said you were to help me out, didn't he? You heard him. I'll need a bit more from you yet. Next time your father brings you in, make sure you ask to see me as soon as he's done running his tests.

You're such a good girl, doing everything I want you to. We've got something really fun lined up today. Lucky for us this gentleman doesn't have any family. It's a rare chance, and we're going to wring out every bit of data we can get from it. Ready?

Her chest ached. Her tears had dried up a while ago, but she was still shaking and sniffing. She hadn't wanted to kill that poor man. She didn't mean to. But she had, and her own father had put her in that position, had given her over to that man and there was the familiar anger and betrayal again, but she forced herself to put it aside for just a moment.

She couldn't remember her father ever explicitly stating his agreement to any experiments. He'd only ever spoken of the tests he'd run on her, and those had been simple things involving having a machine scan her while she sat around in boredom or broke down a piece of paper or tried to focus her Resonance on different items without touching them. The assurance that he'd approved of those *other* experiments had come second-hand, from the man who'd conducted them and who'd therefore had an excellent reason to want to keep her pliable and obedient.

Her father couldn't possibly be innocent, could he? After all this time, was that to be the plot twist in her life?

She couldn't entertain the possibility, but no matter how much she tried to deny it, it hung in the back of her head.

Memories were fallible things. She'd read about that once. The human brain tended to twist and distort recollections, though it did so in such a subtle way that you'd never know anything had happened to your supposedly inviolate personal recording of a past event. And how could you? It all happened in your own brain, and that was the final bastion of what reality was for each individual. Only in comparing personal recollections with those of others or even of video recording did it become apparent that your brain was the greatest editor of all.

So there was no guarantee that her father wasn't involved. There was always a chance that he had been, even though she couldn't properly remember it. That her anger wasn't misplaced, and that she was right to distrust him.

There was also a chance that she'd spent the last seventeen years labouring under a delusion.

"I don't want to overstep," Eira said.

Len kept plodding on. One foot in front of the other. The wind was gentle today, for the first time in three days. She should have been happy for the chance to stretch her legs, but instead, she felt – well. She felt.

She was determined to put it out of her mind. She had always managed it before. Not with the contents of the letters, seeing as she'd never read them before, but she'd always managed to suppress the sudden flares of desire to return. It might be a little more complicated this time, but she was sure she could still push it all away.

The horizon was clear now. No sign of a storm building anywhere. Not for the time being, in any case. The weather was fickle, but they were safe at least for the next few hours.

"But you've seemed upset about something," Eira said. "The past couple of days, I mean."

One foot in front of the other. Step. Step.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

She could help by not asking. It was making it hard for Len to keep ignoring everything.

“Let me know if there is,” Eira’s voice was soft and understanding, and Len blinked burning eyes. It wasn’t like she did understand. It was just the tone of voice you were supposed to use, and Eira just happened to pull it off well.

Len glanced at Eira’s face. Eira wasn’t looking at her, but there was something sad about the set of her face.

Well, she’d read that it was sometimes helpful to talk to someone you didn’t have a personal investment in. Something about distance and clarity. Len looked for a suitable spot to stop, and found a ragged rock that would do. She turned towards it.

“Len?”

Len pushed hard at the rock. It looked ready to fall over at any second, but in fact, didn’t budge at all under her hands. She sat down and patted the sand next to her with one hand, pulling her notebook and pencil out with the other.

Eira sat down next to her, close but not touching. She’d learned her lesson. Len felt a flash of guilty amusement as she opened her notebook to a clean page.

There’s a saying among Resonants, she wrote. “Know yourself.” It’s not a proven theory, but the running idea right now is that it’s people who have a strong sense of self that survive the change. Otherwise, your Resonance destroys you. You go mad because of all the data your brain can’t process. You have to be absolutely certain of who you are as a person, and then you know that all this extra other stuff you’re getting is something other than you. Does that make sense?

“Sure, for a given value of sense.”

Len’s lips quirked up of their own accord. *I’ve never had a problem with that. I always knew what made me, me. I had a routine, you know? But lately I’ve been thinking about a change to that routine. It’s throwing me off. And that makes me scared. I know the theory’s not proven, but all signs point to it being true. It’s a case of “it hasn’t been proven wrong yet, and there’s a good chance it’s right.” If I start questioning myself, or if I want to change something in my life, what if my Resonance lashes out? I don’t have complete control over it to begin with, so what if it goes out of control altogether? That’s what I’ve been thinking about lately. It’s probably not made me good company. Sorry.*

Eira had Manny for company in any case, so Len doubted her presence had been missed, even when she’d been locked away in her room for hours on end. But at

the same time, Eira had seen something different about her. Seen it, and offered a listening ear. It seemed only polite to acknowledge that.

Eira sighed and leaned back once she'd read the message. "I don't know what the latest gossip is amongst Resonants, but that doesn't seem right." She rubbed the back of her neck, looking up at the clouds as if searching for the right words, hidden in them. "I think maybe you're mixing two things together? Knowing yourself doesn't mean always staying exactly the same, see."

Len frowned.

Eira pursed her lips, then nodded. "Yeah, I think that's it. You say you've got to know yourself, but that means you need to know how you change, too. You're not the same person now that you were when you were five. You didn't realise it, but you've changed. You're worrying because this time you're seeing the change happen, when before you didn't. Maybe because before, it happened slower, and this time it's happening all at once."

Plausible. Not an angle she'd thought of taking, but it made a certain amount of sense.

Eira gave her a long look. It felt like she was being judged for something. Len told herself to breathe, but only managed to do so when Eira gave a decisive nod.

"Keep something secret?" she asked. "From everyone. Doc and Manny too."

Len nodded.

Eira raised her hands and cupped them into a shallow container. She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together. For a moment, nothing happened. Then there was a drop of water in Eira's hands. The drop became larger. Larger, larger, until it was a tiny pool in her palms. Eira opened her eyes and held her hands closer to Len.

Len pulled off one glove and held out her bare hand. Eira let some of the water trickle into her palm. It felt cool. Wet. It wasn't an illusion. Len drank the small mouthful of water before it could dissolve. It tasted clean and fresh. She shook her palm dry and put her glove back on, then leaned against the rock and stared up at the sky.

Eira shifted next to her. "Keep it secret," she said in a low voice, and Len nodded with wide eyes.

It made no sense. Eira wasn't from Maraoma; she was by her own admittance Tejara born and bred. But Resonance had begun with a failed experiment at the Institute in Maraoma that had affected a certain number of people with a certain radius of the experiment, which in turn meant that only those people ought to have Resonance. Maraoma had never offered any further information about that experiment – about the accident, as it was termed. It was later discovered that Resonance could be passed on to the offspring of Resonants, so the pool of Resonants in Maraoma had grown slightly with Len's generation. And they, like their parents before them, had been subjected to a facial tattoo as soon as they were legal, in order to Mark them to the general public.

Eira wasn't Marked. She wasn't old enough to be from that first generation, so it must have been a parent who had passed it on – but Maraoma did not allow its Resonants to migrate to other cities. Somehow, Eira's Resonant parent must have escaped notice, but Len couldn't think of how.

And on top of everything else, Len knew of no one who had ever Resonated with water. Most Resonants found that their ability was shared with at least one other. Only a rare few found themselves alone in their ability. Len was one. And now, Eira.

A sudden smile took over Len's face.

"What?" Eira asked.

Len leaned forward to write in her notebook again. *Doc was so confused about how you made it through losing your caravan without suffering dehydration.*

Eira giggled, looking both sheepish and amused. "Yeah, lack of water wasn't a problem. I told her I had a canteen at first but I lost it a few hours before you found me."

Len gave her an amused look.

"But anyway, it was only less than a day. It wouldn't have been that bad, right?"

Len raised an eyebrow and gave her a sharp nod. In the full desert heat, without even the protection of a portable shield, Eira should have been suffering the effects of dehydration by that point. It wouldn't have been enough to kill her, but it

should have slowed her down at the least. Her ability went a long way to explaining how she'd survived.

Though Len wasn't willing to take away Eira's 'Lucky' moniker. She'd still survived a windstorm twice, and come away from them with only minor sand abrasion. Len had once seen a man who'd had his skin scoured off after getting caught in a similar situation. He had still been alive when he'd been carried into the Waystation by the passing caravan that had found him, and his piteous moans were something Len still remembered with vivid clarity. She wished she didn't. He had survived thanks to Doc's skill, but was still in a considerable amount of pain when he left for Bijali with the caravan that had saved him.

"Where did you go?"

Len shrugged, then wrote in her notebook after a moment of consideration. *I'm glad you made it through that storm all right.*

Eira read it and breathed out a brief laugh. "So am I." She leaned in towards Len, her gaze intent and heavy. "I'm glad I made it here."

Len swallowed and nodded, then looked down at her notebook to write again. *Did you want to say something specific about it, or were you just showing me?*

"Can't it be both?" Eira sat back a little. "I could have made the comparison without showing you, but I sort of wanted to show you too, so."

Len gave her an enquiring look.

"Maybe it's because of my power, but I feel like water's a good way to think of things. It can flow anywhere, take on any shape depending on the container, right?" It could, yes, but Len didn't see where Eira was going with that. "But it's still water. Whether it's a cube because it's in a box, or whether it's a —" Eira made a vague gesture with her hands. "A bottle shape, in a bottle. Whatever."

Len smiled, and Eira stuck her tongue out at her. "Still water," she reiterated. "Still water even as gas or ice, come to think of it, still those same molecules, just fitted a little different, and able to move from one to another without really changing what it is. And see, if I ask you what the shape of water is, can you answer that?"

The shape was determined by the external structure. That meant in turn that water had no shape of its own. But what about a single drop of water? She could make a case for water being that shape — but then, it was still different in different

conditions, wasn't it? A drop falling through the air was different from a drop that had landed on the ground, and even then the material it landed on would cause the drop to cling differently. A rounder sphere on one surface; a flatter disc on another.

"No one answer, is there?" Eira asked with a smile. "And that's how I think people are. Change is part of who we are, see, and that's where I think you're tripping up. You're like water that's flowing into a differently shaped container, but you don't want to, you want to go back to your old shape. But just because the shape's changing doesn't mean you're a completely different person. It's just a... variation." She waved her hands again, but if there was any meaning to the movement, Len couldn't tell.

She supposed it made some degree of sense. As metaphors went, it seemed incomplete – what about people who did change in some drastic way, who found new belief systems or who reinvented themselves? But as a basic explanation, it worked. More to the point, it relieved her to think that perhaps changing didn't mean losing herself, so she'd accept it if only for that reason.

Well and good for you, she wrote, though she had decided to accept Eira's view for the time being. She was still curious about what Eira might say about the first thought that had come to Len's mind while listening to Eira's theory. But my ability isn't quite the same, is it?

"Sure it is," Eira said without hesitation. "Deconstruction means it's some kind of disintegration, right? You can affect any kind of material you want?"

And those she didn't. Len nodded.

"Then it's the same thing in reverse. It all breaks down to the same thing, so even if the shape was different to start with, your ability proves that moving from one shape to another doesn't change the basic parts. Break a thing down, and put it back together differently. Oh, it's like food powder, don't you think? All broken down so we can reshape it into something we can eat."

Molecules, atoms. The fundamentals were the same, was that it? How simple. Yet how clear and bright Eira's world must be.

Len gave up resisting. There was no use fighting any longer.

Thank you, she wrote. Shall we head back?

Chapter 5

Having a shared secret was a strange experience.

On the one hand, it changed nothing. Eira still spent time with Manny, still laughed and smiled and joked as she always did. Len still performed her duties as she always did, still wrote and read when she had free time. But from time to time, there was a quick smile from Eira that seemed to have a greater weight to it; there were moments when Len found herself remembering the feel of cool water on her hands and in her mouth.

They didn't talk about it. Len burned to find out how Eira could be a Resonant, but she didn't ask. Eira would volunteer the information if she felt comfortable with it, just as she had shared the secret of her ability without prompting. It didn't seem right to press her about it.

Instead, Len found herself spending a significant amount of time in contemplation about her own state of affairs. She could remain at the Waystation for as long as she wanted. She could stay here until her death if she so wished. It was a simple life, but there was nothing she wanted for here. It would be fine to stay.

Fine, but for the fact that she didn't want to. It wasn't a new emotion. What was new was that she didn't try to deny it this time. She let it come, embraced it, let it fill her and shore her up against the uncertain future. It was easier than she'd ever dreamed it could be.

She supposed it would be harder when it came time to confront her demons. For now, she would take things a step at a time. Eira's astonishing acceptance and openness made her wonder how many others might respond in the same way. If there were others in Maraoma who would likewise accept her, then it might not be so very terrible to return. There was still the fear of what might happen to her if the wrong sorts of people found her, of course. Having one or two or ten friends in Maraoma meant nothing if they got their hands on her again. It was that fear that had kept her chained here all this while; that had made her deny her growing loneliness and apathy and the way she was being drained of every ounce of soul she had. There was only so long she could lie to herself, though.

Manny hadn't known what to make of her at first, but had grown to respect her. She was certain of his regard for her. Even if Eira's instant acceptance was harder to find, Manny's brand of confusion leading to understanding seemed realistic enough to expect. There would be others who would refuse to understand, but if there was even the slightest possibility that she could find those who would –

She couldn't hold back the longing. She wanted to leave this exile.

The only way to find out if she was still in danger was to return to Maraoma and see for herself. She would have to weigh the risks and benefits, and she didn't know which side she'd come down on in the end. For now, though, there was at least one thing she could do in order to break out of the additional shell she'd created around herself to keep everyone at bay.

"Hello," she tried. Her voice sounded strange to her. In the beginning, when she had dramatically announced that she would never speak again, she hadn't quite kept to her word. She'd still made sounds, still spoken to herself when no one was listening. But in time, she'd stopped doing even that much, and now it felt like her throat and tongue and lips didn't know quite what to do. Her silence had once been a choice; now it felt like a habit she needed to break. She cleared her throat and tried again.

It felt awkward speaking to no one, so she pulled out a book and began to read it aloud. She had to stop for water two pages in, but after that she got into her stride and blazed through the rest of the chapter. By the end, she was tripping over her words because she couldn't get them out as fast as she wanted to.

She closed the book and considered her options. Eira had unwittingly set a lot of this into motion, so she was a possibility. Manny had supported her for three years now, so he might have a better claim. Doc had come all the way here and stayed simply to ensure that she was all right, so even if Len wasn't quite friends with her, she still deserved it. All of them at once was the most intimidating option, but there would be much scarier things to face once she was back in Maraoma.

She hadn't made any firm decisions by the time she set out dinner and rang the bell to call everyone down. It was therefore as much of a surprise to her as anyone else when, in response to Manny's request for more beef, she said, "I'm leaving."

Manny dropped the serving spoon back into the bowl of beef with a clatter. Doc froze with her spoon halfway to her mouth. Eira stared between them uncertainly as she chewed on her mouthful of rice.

“Back to Maraoma, then?” Doc asked.

“Yes,” Len managed to get out. She nearly knocked her glass over when she reached out, but managed to rescue it and gulped down a mouthful of water.

“Hm. Manny, weren’t you talking about leaving as well?” Doc asked.

“Uh, yeah,” he said, grimacing. “I mean, I hadn’t thought of a specific date or anything, but – yeah. It doesn’t feel like I’m getting anything more out of my Resonance, so.”

“I think so too,” Len said.

“Well, we can’t all leave at once, so we shall have to take it in turns,” Doc said. “But it’s as well you made the decision now, Len. I was planning on bringing it up to you at the end of the year if you hadn’t said anything about returning by then.”

“Why’s that?” Eira asked. “Is there a limit on how long one can stay out here?”

“Not an official one,” Doc said. “However, a lack of policy does not mean that it is healthy to remain in relative isolation for so long. We are social creatures. No one sane would want to stay here for as long as Len has.”

“You don’t have to say it like that,” Manny said with a frown. “Besides, haven’t you been here nearly as long?”

“Not by choice,” Doc said.

Sorry, Len tried to say, but the word got stuck in her throat. Doc’s sharp words were too intimidating to respond to.

“In any case, Len learned everything she could about her ability in the first four years she was here.” Doc’s lips were pressed together, thin and disapproving as she looked at Len. “The rest of the time, you’ve been stagnating. I thought that there was no harm in your staying here until you were an adult, but that time came and went, and still you stayed, even without a reason to. Going back will be good for you.”

Doc’s face was still stern, but her words and tone were positive. Encouraging. Manny must have thought so too, because he got a surprised look on his face and fell silent.

“I wanted to leave back then,” Len blurted out. Her throat felt dry. Talking was more work than it seemed. She reached for her glass again, but didn’t drink. “But I got – when they came to give me my tattoo, I thought...”

Doc’s scowl became more pronounced. “Those damn tattoos,” she muttered, and savagely stabbed at a piece of beef with her fork. “Branding you like you’re...” She didn’t finish the sentence, choosing instead to chew violently on her food.

That *had* to be support for Len. And for Resonants in general. Len exchanged an awed look with Manny; she’d never seen Doc get that worked up about anything. For it to be an injustice to Resonants that got Doc’s dander up was astonishing.

Really, what was Len supposed to do with all this hopefulness she was feeling?

“When will you be leaving?” Eira asked, breaking the awkward silence. “On the next caravan, or do you need time to sort out your affairs?”

“There’s nothing to sort here,” Manny laughed.

Len ducked her head to hide her rueful smile. “On the next available caravan,” she confirmed. “That is, if Doc and Manny can manage all right with just two.”

“We shall manage,” Doc said. “Inform them that we need a replacement for you at once. In fact, see if they can’t manage two.”

“Suppose you can put in my resignation for me?” Manny asked. “Doc, what about you?”

“I shall leave in a year’s time,” Doc answered. “That will give me enough time to finish up my current project and settle the next doctor in.”

“We’re all leaving one by one, eh?” Manny reflected.

“I’ll put in both your resignations when I get there,” Len offered. Talking seemed to be coming easier now. It helped that her current audience was these three – she was comfortable with Manny, she quite liked Eira, and even if Doc was sometimes hard to deal with, even she was being so supportive of Len’s decision that her distant nature no longer seemed a hindrance. “A suitable doctor will likely take longer to hire anyway.”

“In that case, I shall write up my resignation as well,” Doc agreed. “Putting a firm date of departure on it should work to get them hunting in earnest for a replacement. Hm. Let me add a brief letter to address how many replacements we need in all.” She went back to her food with an abstracted air of deep thought.

For some time, the only noise was the clinking of their cutlery. Eira finished her food and pushed aside her plate with a contented sigh.

“The caravan’s coming tomorrow, isn’t it?” she asked. “Does that mean you’ll be leaving with me?”

“If there’s room. You take priority, of course, so if they don’t have space for two, I’ll wait for the next supply run. But if they do have space, then yes, I’ll join you.”

“Nice! I’ll be glad for your company.”

“Ah, wish I could have company too,” Manny moaned. “Len, you won’t mind if I look you up once I get there myself?”

“Of course not,” Len replied. “In fact, I’d have to insist on it.”

He looked quite pleased at that, and the conversation turned thereafter to what they might do once they got to Maraoma. Len let herself drop out of the conversation by increments until she’d finished her meal, then excused herself altogether by using the dishes as an excuse. She was out of practice with making small talk; she’d gotten so tired, so fast.

Doc brought her dishes to the kitchen sink, which was such atypical behaviour that Len wondered if she wasn’t much more startled than she appeared to be. “Well done,” Doc said, and clasped her shoulder in a gentle but firm grip, ensuring that Len could see the gesture coming. “You truly are as brave as your parents said, aren’t you?”

Len gaped at her.

Doc smiled and patted her shoulder once, then let go and headed off. It took a few moments for Len to focus enough to continue washing the dishes.

Her sleep was restless that night, but if she had any dreams, she didn’t remember them.

The caravan arrived mid-morning the next day, rolling in with a great mechanical groan and kicking up fine dust in its wake. Manny directed the caravan towards the storage building while Eira hovered, watching the proceedings with fascination. When the travellers emerged and began straggling towards the main building, Eira followed in their wake.

It was normally Manny who registered the travellers, but this time, it was Len behind the computer. “Welcome to Waystation 11-2,” she said, trying not to let her

nerves show in her voice. "Are there any immediate concerns that need addressing? No? Then if the caravan leader could come this way."

The leader's name was Marthamma; she was a tiny woman on the cusp of old age, with wrinkled brown skin that hung off her bones in sagging folds. She looked like she ought to be resting comfortably at home instead of leading caravans through the desert for a living, but her face was unyielding and her hand was certain and quick as she filled out the information that Len asked for.

"That's all we need," Len said at last. "And would you happen to have any space in your caravan, ma'am?"

"Space for three." Knowing dark eyes fixed themselves on her. "You leaving?"

"Yes, and we have a rescue as well." Len gestured at Eira, who bounded forward and introduced herself to Marthamma. "The two of us would like to join you when you leave."

"Can, can," Marthamma said. "We leaving... two days. You can pay?"

"I'll write you a bank transfer slip," Len said. "You can cash it at Maraoma."

"You don't happen to accept working in lieu?" Eira asked hopefully.

Len left her to hash it out with Marthamma. With the registration completed, she wandered over to the medical room and started assisting Doc. It was menial work – sorting and handing Doc medications as needed for the minor complaints the travellers had – but it kept her hands busy while letting her mind wander.

"There was space, so Eira and I will be leaving the day after," she said, once the last of the travellers had been seen to.

"Good, good," Doc said. "You seem quite fond of the young lass."

"She's been – nice," Len said, stumbling over her words. She leaned against the counter and folded her arms across her chest. "About, I mean. The whole thing. Even when I over-reacted."

"And quite pretty?" Doc needled, then laughed at whatever she saw on Len's face. "Well, acceptance and understanding is important, of course. I do hope you'll find more of it back home. I know there's been quite a bit of campaigning done to that end, but of course I haven't seen it for myself."

"There has?"

Doc looked at her with pursed lips. "Are you ready to listen to me now?" she asked. "You've always refused to hear anything said of Maraoma."

"I don't think I could, before," Len confessed. "But I'll hear you out now."

"Hm. In that case, yes, there is rather an ongoing social movement to improve the lot of Resonants. Some laws have been passed to protect you; others are being debated. The situation is far from perfect, but I believe you'll find that it is safer to be a Resonant now than it was even ten years ago."

"Legal safety doesn't mean much when it's your own dad that sells you out," Len snapped.

Doc didn't lose her composure enough to gape, but her mouth did go slack around the edges. "Your – what?" she demanded. "What on earth are you talking about?"

Len didn't answer, too occupied with taking deep breaths so she wouldn't lose her cool. When she looked back up at last, she found that Doc had closed the door and was waiting at her desk.

"Have a seat, Len."

Len rubbed at her eyes and sat.

Doc poured out a glass of water from the carafe that sat on her desk and pushed it over to her. She drank without thinking, draining the glass and pushing it back with a shake of her head. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"I do not believe you have anything to apologise for," Doc said, each syllable crisp and clear, as if she was trying to hold back her emotions. "Will you explain to me what you meant by that?"

Len chewed on her lower lip for a moment. "Just – well. That's what he did. He gave me over to those people. You must know. My parents must have told you something about what happened."

"They did. And I also worked at the Institute, and had my own perspective of what happened there. But I would like to hear it from you. What happened, and what role did your father play in it?"

"He let those people take me," Len said, and looked down at her hands. "Said I should go with them and do whatever they wanted. So it's his fault I had to do all

those things.” It was her fault she’d done them, but he was the one who’d put her in that position.

“Do you think your father knew what was happening?”

“How could he have not?”

There was a long moment of silence that swiftly turned uncomfortable. Len fidgeted in her seat. “He kept telling me to be good for them,” she said, her voice small and pleading. “He knew, didn’t he?”

Doc shook her head and exhaled a slow, controlled breath. “I must apologise,” she said at last. Her fingers tapped against the table in agitation. “I had no idea that this was what you believed or I would have spoken up sooner. Len, when he told you to go with them, all he meant was for you to behave. It was a simple admonishment for a child not to make a nuisance of themselves. He never knew what they asked you to do. Not until months later, when he finished his work early, came looking for you, and chanced upon them in the act.”

They had started with the same sorts of experiments her father had done – using her Resonance on paper and plastic and such, so she had thought their following experiments to be a sanctioned next step. Meat and plants and insects and then that one poor man whose name she didn’t even know. They had run all manner of tests and scans on her, some of them simple, some of them painful, and she remembered her father coming in during one of those and saying “What do you think you’re doing?”

After that, it had stopped. But she had been so very muddled up at the time. It had been years after, in the quiet privacy of the Waystation, that she had learned she wasn’t at fault for having listened. She had been a child, manipulated by greater experience and ruthless guile. It wasn’t her fault. But someone had to be held responsible, and after thorough consideration, she had decided that would fall to her father and that man. The one who had given her up and the one who had directly hurt her.

“Len.”

She reached up to wipe her eyes by instinct, but found them dry. “He still didn’t take care of me,” she muttered.

“He didn’t,” Doc agreed, to Len’s surprise. “He was too trusting. Even if he’d thought that Raj was a friend, he ought to have supervised contact. He ought to have set boundaries so that you would have known right away that what Raj asked of you was wrong. He ought to have made a point of asking you what you’d done each time so that he could check you were fine. But Len, he truly did think at the time that Raj was a trustworthy friend. Raj was convincing. None of us suspected him of anything more insidious than setting his office thermostat below regulation temperature.”

“Then what makes you think that my father hasn’t deceived you the same way?” Len retorted. Everything Doc was saying was something that Len had recently begun wondering about – maybe even before she’d consciously become aware she was thinking about it. But none of that changed what had been done to her. One’s intentions didn’t always matter.

“The investigation was thorough,” Doc said.

“The investigation was conducted in-house, and *he* suffered no legal consequences,” Len replied. “He may have lost his job at the Institute, but he was allowed to go free, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, and that was why your parents were afraid,” Doc said. There was a distinct note of cajoling in her voice now. “That was why they sent you here. When he was fired, they were afraid he might take it out on you. But it has been years since then, Len. I doubt he will try anything at this juncture.”

“And if there’s even the slightest possibility you’re wrong, it’s not you who’s going to suffer.”

Doc passed a hand over her face. “I doubt that I will be able to convince you of this?”

“It’s dangerous for people like me to trust in the goodwill of others,” Len whispered.

“I... cannot disagree,” Doc agreed wearily. “We can only hope that the laws will continue to progress.” She folded her hands on the desk. “But if you feel this way, why are you determined to return to Maraoma?”

She’d thought of running away before. She’d thought of it enough to have a thorough plan worked out. First, a purchase of makeup to hide her facial tattoo. Then onwards to Tanarat on a caravan that wasn’t from Maraoma and didn’t know their

regulations regarding Resonants. The makeup would get her through registration at Tanarat and then she could head for whichever city the next available caravan was going to. Keeping on the move for a time would enable her to outpace anyone sent to retrieve her. When she felt it was safe, she could choose a location to settle down in.

But she had been running all this time. The first few years at the Waystation had been necessary for her recovery, but the rest of it had been nothing more than avoidance. She was tired of running away; tired of her unanswered questions; tired of being held hostage by old fears.

"I want more," she told Doc. She wanted to say more, but the words dried up in the back of her throat.

It seemed to be enough, though. Doc gave her a small, resigned smile. "Good. It's about time you felt that way."

Len looked down. "Even if it means denouncing my father?"

"Haven't you already done that?" Doc asked, then shook her head. "No, never mind. Find your answers and make your decisions, Len. At least this time, you know that it will be *you* who's making them."

Eira was at the end of the hallway, talking to a couple of the travellers. Len leaned against the door to the medical room and watched. There were smiles and laughs all around. Despite having only just met, they all looked to be getting on well. Eira's animated cheer was hard to resist. Len couldn't fathom being that open with perfect strangers.

In two days, Len would be heading towards Maraoma with these same people.

She took a deep breath and started down the hallway. Being open and being polite were two different things. She could manage the latter, and perhaps that would be enough to be getting on with.

Interlude II

Dear Matthias,

By the time you read this letter, Len will be back in Maraoma.

Don't get too carried away with enthusiasm when you read the above line. She is by no means recovered. I know that you have asked me when she will be, but the plain fact is that there is no timeline for this sort of thing. She may improve by being back in society, where she will have a chance for regular social interaction – or she may regress, given that she is losing her safety blanket all at once, with nothing to fall back on when she inevitably faces a difficulty.

Look, she's still not well. I want to make that clear. She has panic attacks, she suffers from insomnia and hypersomnia alternately. I have spoken to her about finding a professional to talk to when she arrives in Maraoma, but I don't know if she will. She still finds it difficult to trust people. After what happened, I can't say I blame her.

But she does appear to be quite taken with a girl we took in recently. That's a good sign. She's still seeking connection, you see? She hasn't been so broken as to deny it altogether. And she has finally reached a point in her healing where she is willing to acknowledge that fact.

So be patient, and let her move at her own pace. Support her as much as she will allow you to.

I don't know when she will seek you out, or if she intends to at all. She has said nothing of the matter to me. From what I've gotten out of Manny, she hasn't spoken to him about it either. If she does look you up, my best advice to you – BE HONEST. You say you struggle with saying the right thing to her. Well, stop trying to pick your words so carefully. What she wants isn't a pretty picture with all its faults erased. She knows that anything perfect is a lie. But if you can be honest with her and admit your faults, there may be a chance for reconciliation.

She thinks that you knew and approved of Raj's experiments on her. That's one thing you might want to clear up, right from the start. I was horrified to find out. No matter how I pushed, she's never spoken of it before, so I didn't know that that was what she thought.

One other matter. I know that it will be hard for you, but if she asks about Lakshmi, please do not deflect. You always do when it's about something emotional, you know? When it's something you find it hard to talk about. But Lakshmi wasn't just your wife – she was also Len's mother. Len deserves to be able to talk about her if she wants to. Prepare yourself for the possibility, and don't shut down about it. If you find it hard to talk about just then, tell her.

She's a grown lady now. You can struggle with that all you want, as long as you do it on your own time. Have the decency to acknowledge the fact she's an adult to her face, though.

This entire letter is nothing but me pre-emptively scolding you, isn't it? My apologies. I find I'm not quite as sanguine as I made myself out to be to Len. I still worry about her, especially given that Raj is still free and living in Maraoma. He may be a good deal poorer these days, but he doesn't have to be rich to set her recovery back. Just his presence will do that. And though you spoke of it with relief, I find it disconcerting to think that he's lying low. When have you ever known that man to do anything that doesn't benefit him in some way?

Keeping an eye on him might be a good idea. Paranoid of me, perhaps – living out here for so long might be turning me into a conspiracy theorist – but better safe than sorry, as they say. In my experience, when you push a man into a corner, he either reveals himself to be a coward, or he lashes out at what he perceives to have "ruined" him. Whatever else I might say about Raj, he's no coward.

I would rest much easier in knowing exactly where he is, and what he's doing. Give a thought to that, even if you think I'm overreacting.

I have not included any of my notes on my research with this letter because I intend to return to Maraoma as soon as my replacement arrives. Len is carrying my resignation with her, so I expect it will be within a few months. I'll be collecting on that lunch you owe me; we can talk shop then.

Sanju

Chapter 6

By the time the caravan was ready to depart, Eira had managed to befriend every single person in the group, worker and passenger alike. There were some she seemed to gravitate towards, but she was still able to hold engaging conversations with those she didn't.

In the same time, Len had managed to introduce herself to around half of them. She wasn't entirely certain she was remembering their names correctly, but it felt rather awkward asking again after they'd already been introduced. There were too many of them for her to keep track of – ten workers and twenty-four passengers meant a sea of faces that all looked the same.

Jin was easy to remember by virtue of being the only child on the journey. His mother May was easy to spot if she was in his vicinity, but if she wasn't, then Len kept mixing her up with Melissa, who had the same fair skin and pin-straight hair that May did. Aaron was easier to recognise by his mien than his appearance – he was an artist with definite ideas about how an artist should present himself, and therefore spent a good deal of time either affecting a tragic air as he stared off into the distance or attempting to engage others in discourse about the nature of humanity. Sanjay reminded her somewhat of Manny, in that he was tall, burly, and possessed of seemingly unending good cheer.

As for the rest, she'd need more time before she felt confident about interacting with them. The journey to Maraoma would take at least a month or so; that was plenty of time.

The caravan workers were up and about even before it was light out, checking the vehicles over and securing them together with stiff, heavy chains. The restraints helped the individual vehicles stay together under the shield, especially when visibility was poor. When Len brought her bags down, she found that they were almost done prepping the caravan, so she hurried off to make one last breakfast for the Waystation. She ate her portion standing up in the kitchen, stealing a moment of solitude to fortify herself for the upcoming journey. Twelve people per trailer meant there would be little in the way of privacy for the next month.

“That’s an impressive sight,” Eira commented, when they went outside to load their bags. “Much bigger than the one I came with.”

There was one lead car, two trucks with electricity generators, one with a water converter, one for the shield core, and three large trailers for passengers. The trailer wheels alone came up to her waist. She knew she was on the shorter side of average, but that was still huge.

Of course, it was necessary. Caravan vehicles were built higher and with broader wheels than vehicles in the city were, so that they could traverse sandy regions without getting bogged down.

“About middling,” Len told Eira. “I’ve seen much bigger. We’ve had processions so big we couldn’t fit all the vehicles into caravan storage and had to park some of them outside.”

Len shook her head. “Well, I’ve not seen all that many, so I’ll keep on thinking it’s big. The one I came with at first only had two vans for passengers, you know? The seats reclined a bit, but we slept sitting up.”

“Ah, one of those.”

“That tone!” Eira laughed.

“Eira, come on!” one of the caravan workers called. “Time to earn your keep!”

“I’ll see you later,” she said, and trotted off to help pin the shield in place.

Once the ports were connected and electricity was flowing through the electromesh fabric, it would stiffen and take on the traditional dome shape that would protect the caravan as it travelled through the desert. All the points where the fabric was pinned down were watched with suspicion for any possibility of failure. Losing a point the way Eira had was common enough. It was only unusual that she’d gotten lost in a storm because of the poor timing.

“Think of me when you’re having fun in the city, eh?” Manny said.

Len gave him a small smile, watching as the caravan workers carted cans of freshly-printed fuel to the trucks with the electricity generators. They had solar panels and mounted miniature windmills as well, but they couldn’t rely on those for the whole journey, and if they depended solely on the amount of fuel their own small printer could supply them with, the trip would take twice as long as it ought to.

Waystations were all therefore equipped to supplement caravans' fuel supplies to the maximum load they could carry.

Manny grinned back at her. "Don't forget to put in our resignations," he said. "We can't leave till our replacements get here, so don't leave us hanging, eh?"

"I'll put them in as soon as I get there, but it's not up to me when your replacements arrive," Len pointed out.

"Don't talk logic at me," Manny scolded.

Len huffed. They watched the caravan workers for a few moments more before a sudden thought occurred to her. "Ah, I forgot to ask. When we found Eira, were you sensing her?"

Manny frowned. "I – I suppose I must have been?"

"Did you sense the radiation sickness?" Len asked. "Can you sense – I don't know. Baseline health for the average human, and you could tell something was off for it?"

Manny was silent for a while. "I don't know," he said at last. "I didn't even think of that. I know I felt something, but I..." He had a pensive look on his face. "Baseline health for people would have to be different for everyone, wouldn't it? I wonder if it's even possible to have a universal baseline in that way..."

Len pressed her lips together for a moment. "Radiation sickness is never good in any amount," she offered.

"Well, now I have something else to figure out while I'm here," Manny mused. "Thanks, darling."

"You're welcome."

"That doesn't mean I'm changing my mind," Manny said. He studied her with disconcerting intensity. Len suspected that he was using his ability in some way, perhaps trying to work out if he could learn the baseline for her health. "I'm still going to head back to Maraoma soon."

Len gave him an enquiring look.

"I've tried enough," he said with a shrug. "I don't think I can fix things. Spotting stuff is going to have to be enough. Even if there's something new to the spotting, I can work on that in Maraoma."

“I think,” Len murmured, “that knowing when something’s wrong is the hardest and most important step anyway.” The conversation she had had with Doc a few nights ago rattled about in her head, and she swallowed hard.

Manny smiled. “Of course you do,” he said. “That’s why you’re leaving.”

The vehicles started up with a roar, then settled into discontented rumbling. Manny looked strangely small when Len looked out the window. He blew her a playful kiss as the caravan began to pull away, then stood outside the Waystation shields and waved until he became a tiny dot in the distance. Once even that dot disappeared, Len leaned back in and shut the window before sitting next to Eira with a sigh.

“Missing him?” Eira asked. Her voice was somehow sympathetic and neutral at the same time. An interesting trick.

“A little,” Len admitted. It wasn’t soon enough to really miss him, but she thought that the feeling would probably intensify as the days went on. He was one of the few Waystation colleagues who’d become a good friend. She had learned to let go of the others when they returned to Maraoma, since keeping in touch would be too difficult.

But Manny would be coming to Maraoma soon enough, so there was no need for her to try and get over him. The feeling of missing him wouldn’t last for long.

“Are you doing the long distance thing?” Eira asked.

Len gave her a blank look.

“I mean, he’s coming to Maraoma soon, right?” Eira asked. “I guess maybe you’ll be waiting for each other till then?”

Len tilted her head, uncertain. “We’re not... dating?” she said, her words tilting into a question with her disbelief at her interpretation of Eira’s words.

“You’re not?” Eira asked, and sat back in surprise. “Oh! Well. Forget I said anything, please.” Her cheeks darkened. “I’ll just – go see if anyone needs anything.”

She clambered out of the trailer, onto the walkway that ran around the vehicle, and hurried off. Len leaned back against the head-rest and stared up at the top of the trailer. She didn’t know what Eira expected to be able to do when they were on the move, and there was no way to get to any of the other vehicles; that had been a terrible excuse to leave.

It was true that she'd once considered a relationship with Manny. She'd also considered a relationship with a couple of others who had come and gone from the Waystation. Given her fear of touching, though, any relationship seemed to her to be doomed to failure even before it began – she couldn't so much as hug her partner. It was for that reason that she'd given up on Manny. And that she was trying to convince herself to stop paying so much attention to Eira.

She ended up dozing off without quite realising it, and woke only when the trailer shuddered to a stop. A few minutes later, some staff climbed into the trailer and handed out the lunches that Len and Manny had packed that morning. Len listened to the conversation flow around her as she ate with everyone else. When they were done, one of the workers collected the empty plates and took them outside.

Len stretched and stepped out onto the walkway. The other vehicles had their doors open too, and the sounds of packing drifted over to her where she stood. Eira must be eating somewhere else, but Len couldn't see her from this vantage point.

The workers finished clearing up. Doors slammed, and the vehicles came back to life. She held on to the safety railing as the trailer jerked forward, relaxing only when it settled into a steady pace. The landscape that rolled by looked exactly like the sort that surrounded the Waystation – sandy, with patches of hardy shrubbery and no other visible life. In the distance were dunes, though the path they were taking was flatter. It would be at least a few more days before the view began to change. She wondered if this strange feeling of hanging in limbo would disappear once she started to see real differences around her.

Her eyes were beginning to glaze over. She shook herself and lifted her gaze to the horizon.

The shield around the caravan was sheer, almost transparent, with much less heft to it than the Waystation's. It was easy to see through, though it lent a hazy air to everything beyond it. The clouds were muted by the shield; the sand seemed softer. She wasn't sure she liked it. It interfered with any attempt at reading the weather, and that didn't seem safe to her.

Of course, most people didn't make any such attempt. That was what Maraoma's weather seers were for. Len wondered if perhaps other cities, in absence

of a weather seer to do all the hard work for them, made an effort to understand the shifting moods of wind and sand. They might, if only to better protect themselves against the vagaries of the planet. Or perhaps those who drove these caravans between cities studied the weather, as the ones who needed protection from it most of all. The areas between the cities were only dangerous to those out in them, after all.

She had once read that these plains had been underwater. That what they called sand had in fact been the sediment that covered the ocean bed. It was hard to imagine that her little Waystation had been built at the bottom of a once-sea.

The caravan would travel across that once-sea to that which had always been land. There would be an uphill climb at some point, she knew. She wondered if she would be scared when the time came. She had never had cause to discover if she had a head for heights or not.

It would be something to look forward to.

She looked around once more for Eira, trying to spot the side-walkers with each vehicle, but failed to find her. Shaking her hair away from her face, she retreated to the trailer. It was cooler inside. The air purifier hummed as it worked. She found a seat in a corner, pulled out her journal, and turned to a clean page.

270th day of the year 127

Much and little has happened since my last entry. I haven't done much in the grand scheme of things, but I've done a lot of thinking (I have gone in endless circles) and made a decision that I am now far past the point of taking back.

I am on a caravan heading to Maraoma.

There are still a number of worries that haunt me, but I think this is necessary. I have to get some answers. I still have so many questions, and I don't feel that I can ignore them any longer. I once thought that I could, but my past seems to keep calling me back. It's my personality, I think. Maybe another person could throw it all aside and reinvent themselves completely, but I find that I can't quite let go.

If I get the answers I'm looking for – even if they're not what I hoped for – I think I will finally be able to move on. That's what I hope for, and the reason I've decided to return. Avoiding the questions has clearly not worked, so it's time to confront them.

Not a new thought, of course. I had a few days between my decision to leave and actually leaving (how well thought out this plan is) and I spent a large part of them skimming through my old journals. This is something I've repeatedly written about, but never acted on. Perhaps making a snap decision was for the best after all. If I had had to wait any longer for a caravan, would I have changed my mind? I'd like to think not, but I have proof that I've done just that on many occasions prior.

Well, there's no point dwelling now. At present, I may be afraid of what lies ahead, but I have no regrets about leaving.

Correction: one regret. Not so much about leaving, but about not having taken the time to get to know Doc better. You'd think that after so many years I'd know her better, wouldn't you? But from the moment I knew my parents had sent her to keep an eye on me, I was determined never to trust her. Even after it became clear she had no intention of experimenting on me, even after she proved that she did care in her own awkward way for me – I still never let myself get close to her. Part of it was her general attitude of presumptuous superiority, but part of it (I must be honest) was also my inability to change. I didn't know how to alter my relationship with her, so I let things go on as they were. I do that a lot, don't I? Let things I disagree with go on because I don't want to address them.

It's a flaw. I'll have to correct that.

I talked to Doc before leaving, and discovered that she only had a passing familiarity with radiation studies before she came out to the Waystation. She only took it up because she felt it was the best use she could make of her time while out there.

In other words, she changed the course of her work and came out to the middle of nowhere because my parents asked it of her; because of me, perhaps? I don't know if I ought to credit it to myself even in part, or if it was only out of friendship for them. But what degree of friendship could have kept someone there for so long? Even Kishu Aunty left after only two years, and I don't think she once stopped to look back when she left. I wonder if it's arrogant to hope that she did stay for me, and not my parents. That she grew to care about me for myself.

Especially since I certainly haven't appreciated her all this while. I've decided, though I haven't told her, that I'm going to try and keep in contact with her once she

returns to Maraoma. I suppose I'll find out then if she does like me for me. If we can become friends in any kind of way.

That's months away, though. First, I need to focus on what to do when I get to Maraoma. Here's the downside of making snap decisions: not having the faintest idea about where to go afterwards. I don't even know how to find him. I know that they moved because Amma wrote about it – but she never gave an address, and none of the letters have a return address on them. Not something you'd need when it's going out to a Waystation, I suppose.

I'll take it a day at a time. Get used to Maraoma first. The place must have changed a great deal, going by all the things that Amma described in her letters. Once I'm used to it I'll think about how to find him. Hopefully I'll be able to come up with something concrete to ask him about in the time it takes to get there and settle in.

A change of topic, because I can feel myself start to go in circles with worry again:

Eira is on the caravan with me, but she is outside at the moment. She's working to pay her way, so I will undoubtedly have stretches of time to myself when she takes a shift side-walking. (Side note: Why on earth is it called side-walking? As far as I can tell, it's never involved walking even since its inception. It's always been about standing on the platform outside the vehicle. Side-standing, perhaps – not the safest way to travel, but there you have it. Come to think of it, I wonder what happened when Eira fell off that previous caravan – was she not wearing the usual safety harness, or did it fail?)

It's pleasant to have a travelling companion I'm acquainted with. I do wonder if she'll cause any more changes to my life, though. I rather think that she's been the catalyst for every change I've made recently, even if she doesn't even know it. I suppose we'll see.

She considered adding more. After a few moments, she closed her journal with a sigh instead. She put it on her lap and clasped her hands around it.

On the opposite bench, May stroked Jin's hair as he dozed on her lap. Her face was tired and her lips were pulled into an unhappy frown, but her hand was gentle in its movements. Stroke, stroke. Len watched, and for the first time in years, didn't suppress the ache when it came.

Eira came back into the trailer two hours later when they stopped again for a quick changeover in staff. Her face was flushed and sweaty, and there was a streak of grime across her temple. She threw a smile in Len's direction as she headed to the washroom. A few minutes later, she emerged looking much cleaner, and came over to sit next to Len.

Len considered starting a conversation, but she didn't know what to say. A comment on what Eira had been doing? A question about why she'd left so suddenly, earlier? But she had left it too long and the silence had been unbroken long enough that to do so now would be awkward. Her fingers tightened around her journal. Her throat hurt, in any case. That was the reason why she hadn't greeted Eira.

"I keep seeing you write in that," Eira said, voice low in deference to the atmosphere. Everyone was either sleeping or doing something quiet. Three people were chatting on the other side of the trailer, equally quiet. "Is it a diary?"

Len nodded. Then she hastily added, "Yes." It was far too easy to slip back into old habits.

"I tried to keep one before, but I always forgot to write in it and then when I remembered, there never seemed a point writing in it, given, you know, the last entry was a year ago or something," Eira confessed. "I bet you kept it up every day, didn't you?"

"Hardly," Len replied with a soft huff of laughter. "I mean, I used to write quite often. Every few days. But it slowly became every few weeks, and the entries kept getting shorter. These days I write a weekly update – just a few lines, really – and I only write a proper entry if something important or out of the ordinary happens."

"Like finding me?" Eira asked.

Len pressed back a smile, but Eira grinned at her as if she'd seen it anyway. "There's no point writing about mundane details, is there?" Len said. "At least finding a body in the desert is something different."

"You know, I've heard that historians like mundane details," Eira argued. "Something about – over time, a lot of knowledge gets lost about how people lived back then? Because a lot of it seems like common sense, or just everywhere, and so people don't think it's important enough to put down. But then centuries down the line, all those commonplace things are gone and no one wrote about it so the

historians end up tearing their hair out trying to figure out how people lived in such and such time.”

“In that case, my early journals will be a treasure trove to historians in the centuries to come.”

“You joke, but they might well be. Something might seem insignificant to us, but be super important to someone else, you know?”

In that case, if Len felt like her very existence was insignificant, was there still a possibility that she could be important in some way? “Maybe,” she said. “Hey, do you have any family in Maraoma, or are you going in blind?”

“An aunt, apparently, but I didn’t know about her till I decided to move and my mum told me. I don’t know her, but I’ve got her address. You?”

For a heartbeat, Len considered lying. “My father’s there,” she said, swallowing.

“Going to stay with him?” Eira asked, oblivious to the way Len felt queasy. “Better than the Lodges, I guess. I’ll be stuck there till I get a bit more saved up.”

“I’m staying in the Lodges too,” Len managed to get out. “I’d prefer my own space. Manny grew up in the Lodges, apparently. He’s always saying how terrible they are. I want to see how much he was exaggerating.”

“At least half?”

“How generous of you. Three-quarters at least.”

Eira stifled a giggle, glancing over to make sure she hadn’t woken Jin up with the sudden sound. “How is he?” she asked, and Len looked up to see May giving them an amused, if tired smile.

“Doing much better,” May said. “At least he’s stopped throwing up.”

Jin had come down with a nasty stomach bug on the same day that the caravan had arrived at the Waystation. Doc had prescribed some medicines to ease his discomfort, but the illness would otherwise have to run its course. The young boy had been miserable for the past few days, but if Doc was to be believed, he would be showing signs of recovery soon.

“That’s good,” Eira said. “Are we bothering you?”

May shook her head. "I might take a nap myself. Don't worry, we're both sound sleepers." She leaned back against the head-rest and closed her eyes, still sitting upright.

"Sleep well," Eira said, and turned to Len. "Have you decided on a job when you get there?"

"I'm not getting one yet." It was a spontaneous decision, but it felt right. She could get by for a while on what she had saved, and she was certain she'd need the time to herself without worrying about a job. She'd think about it when her savings started running low. "Thought I'd take a bit of a holiday first. Do you have something sorted?"

Eira made a see-sawing motion with her hand. "Something in service, I guess. I can do that sort of thing fine. I'm not much fussed, so I'll take whatever comes by first that pays decent."

They chatted for a while longer, and then Eira took a quick nap before being summoned for her next shift. Len pulled out a book from her backpack and ignored the man on the other end of the trailer who was giving her a speculative look. She made her posture as uncommunicative as possible, feeling quite talked out.

A few hours later, the trailer grumbled to a stop once more. This time, when the caravan staff came in, they began to unfold the upper bunks. Len stowed her book in her backpack and moved out of their way. There were six beds on either wall, stacked in two sets of three. The thought of climbing into the topmost bunk made her stomach drop, so once they were done, she put her backpack on one of the lower beds that was further from the door.

"Try and take the top two rows if you can," one of the staff said. "So that we don't have to climb over your bed when we come in."

Len pursed her lips, wondering what would happen if she rolled over in her sleep.

"Don't want to climb?" one of other staff members asked her. This one Len knew – her name was Yanyu, and she had been quite enthusiastic about Len's cooking at the Waystation.

"I don't want to be a bother..." Her voice trailed off.

“You’re not, it’s fine,” Yanyu said. “Lots of people are like that. Here, let’s get these filled up.” She waved at the bunks above the one Len had claimed, and the other passengers started shuffling around.

“Moma, please?” Jin asked, eyes bright but sleepy.

“We’re sharing, we need the bottom bunk,” May told him. His face fell. “Don’t give me that. How many times have you asked? The answer’s not going to change.”

The other passengers arranged their sheets on their beds, leaving those closest to the door free for the staff. “Dinner!” Aaron announced, as he hopped off his bed. “Oh, joyous day. I wonder what’s on the menu.”

The sarcasm didn’t make sense to Len until she tried eating the freshly-printed dinner. It claimed to be chicken porridge, but she couldn’t find the slightest trace of chicken in it – or flavour, for that matter. After the first terrible mouthful, the remainder all dissolved in her mouth before she had to deal with the taste or texture. It was the first time she’d thought of that quirk of her Resonance as a blessing.

“I’d forgotten what that tasted like,” Eira complained. She’d spent dinner talking to some of the caravan staff, but had found her way back to Len’s side after eating.

“I don’t even remember what it was like when I went to the Waystation,” Len sighed. “I must have blocked it out as a traumatising memory.”

“Probably.”

They didn’t linger over dinner, but once everything had been cleared away, Len found that everyone hung around in a large group to socialise. It was hard enough dealing with a few strangers at a time – a large group was overwhelming, and she found herself trailing meekly in Eira’s wake as Eira smoothly joined and left conversations. At least she was able to learn a few more names in the process – Jacob, Lan, Shun, Sophia, Anjali, Meenakshi.

She quickly grew tired, though, and she withdrew at the first available opportunity. May and Jin went back to the trailer with her, Jin drooping despite his yawning protests that he could stay up longer, really he could. May chivvied him into the washroom to clean up, and he was out cold seconds after climbing into bed.

“This boy,” May mumbled, shaking her head as she got a change of clothes out for herself. She hesitated and glanced at Len. “Do you mind... I want to bathe. I’ll be quick. If he needs anything...”

“I’ll keep an eye out,” Len said.

“Thank you.”

Once May had disappeared into the washroom, Len opened her backpack and pulled out the item that took up most of the room in it. She spread the wide blanket across the bed, wrapping it over the pillow on the top. She would use that part as bedsheets, and the excess material as the blanket proper, to cover herself with. The treated blanket would stop her from dissolving the caravan’s pillows or sheets if she rolled over in her sleep and pressed her face into the pillow. Always careful. Vigilant. Outside of her room, outside of the Waystation, her life was a series of just-in-case precautions.

True to her word, May was back in ten minutes, dressed in comfortable sleeping attire. Len took her own turn in the washroom to clean up and change, then climbed into bed with a book.

People started trickling in over the next hour or two. About an hour in, Eira stopped by to say goodnight. Len kept reading until the staff announced the lights were going out. Then she put the book away and stretched out, pulling her blanket over the side and wrapping herself in it.

Chapter 7

Day by day, the rhythm of the caravan became clearer. Jin recovered and became a bit of a terror, running, climbing and jumping all over the limited space afforded to him in the trailer. May took him out on the walkway on occasion, but his recklessness made those occasions rare.

"I keep thinking he'll slip under the railing and fall off before I can reach him," she told Len, as they watched him bounce up and down at the window. "I feel bad he can't run around, but..."

Jin got to run around properly when they stopped for the night, but it was nowhere near enough to expend his energy. Len foresaw the remainder of this journey being noisy.

The rest of the passengers seemed to be used to it, though there were a few people that Jin assiduously avoided. Len thought at first that they might be the quieter sort she'd get on with, but a few tentative attempts at conversation revealed that they were in fact just unpleasant types. They were in the other trailers, though, so it was easy enough to avoid them.

"Mum always said children are good at sussing people out," Eira laughed, then lowered her voice to a guilty whisper. "That Don guy's a real piece of work, huh? Like he thinks he's so much better than the rest of us."

"I'm sure that's exactly what he thinks," Len muttered into her tasteless dinner. "But I don't think Jin likes me either."

"He does, though," Eira said in surprise. "He keeps asking me about you. I think he's a bit shy, maybe."

Jin whooped as he ran by and flung himself at Aaron with a cheerful demand to know what he was doing.

Len raised an eyebrow.

"He *is*," Eira insisted. "You're quiet, so he doesn't know how to talk to you just yet. Give him time. I bet he's just working out the best way to approach you."

"You make me sound like a desert gecko," Len grumbled.

The fifth day of travel was Eira's day off, and she celebrated by sleeping in. She got up only when one of the caravan staff dragged her out of bed so that the seats

could be set up for the passengers. She ate breakfast with the crew, then waved them off with a smile and joined Len as they boarded the trailers again.

“Want to do anything?” she asked. The trailer began to roll forward, slowly picking up speed.

Len shrugged.

“Let’s head outside,” Eira suggested.

It was as good an idea as any. They headed out together, and Eira led Len to the side of the walkway, away from the engines so that they wouldn’t have to shout over the noise. They leaned against the safety rail, side by side, and Eira filled the air between them with idle chatter about what she’d been doing the past few days, and how much better she’d gotten at regulating the shield point.

“The hardest part is standing for so long,” she told Eira. “But I think I’m getting the hang of that too. I’m better than I was before, I think.”

Len hesitated for a moment. “You – don’t get scared?” she asked.

“Of course I do,” Eira said. “But that won’t stop me doing it anyway.”

Len tried to smile. “Brave of you.”

“Or stupid,” Eira said. “Anyway, it’s not the only way to deal with being scared.” She gave Len an understanding look. “Do whatever’s right for you.”

The smile came a little easier this time.

“You know what I miss, though,” Eira said, sighing. “Your cooking. Stars, I miss proper food.”

“Mash for lunch,” Len said. “Mash for dinner. Mash for breakfast.”

“The real reason Waystations are necessary is so that people can get some actual food in between the mash.”

“It’s nutritious,” Len said, then laughed at the look on Eira’s face.

“Tell me there’s good food at the Lodges,” Eira said.

“Not if Manny’s stories are anything to go by,” Len said, even though she was sure it would be at least of the quality that the Waystation had.

Eira grimaced. “It’s another month to get there, isn’t it?”

“I think so.” She knew the numbers in theory, but she had only made the trip once and her memory of that journey was hazy.

“About that long,” someone said. Len turned to face her, having expected the presence coming up behind her to pass on by. Marthamma nodded at them. “One more Waystation we will stop at. 12-3, in fourteen days. You will get your good food there.”

“I’ll be sure to eat my fill,” Eira said, unabashed at having her complaints overheard.

Marthamma snorted. “We all do that. No one likes travelling food.”

Eira grinned. “Fourteen days to good food, and then another how many days to Maraoma?”

“Two days, we stay at Waystation 12-3,” Marthamma said. “Then twenty days Maraoma, if weather stay good.”

“I wonder if that Waystation will let me pack some snacks,” Eira mused.

“Easy to ask,” Marthamma said, and made to continue on her way.

“Thanks!” Eira called after her, and got a dismissive wave in response.

“Fourteen days. Let’s mark our calendars.”

“I’ll make a note of it. We did usually print snacks for guests if they asked, by the way.”

“Excellent, excellent.”

“But our biscuits weren’t very good,” Len admitted. They were dry and hard and best eaten dunked in tea rather than plain. “So people rarely asked. 12-3’s bigger though, so I’m sure they have something nicer.”

“What, is that how they decide which Waystations get which food templates?”

“It’s how they decide where the funding goes. Busy Routes see larger traveller flows, so they need bigger Waystations, and since there are more people there, they get better amenities.”

“I suppose you liked that your Waystation was quieter.”

Len laughed. “I liked that it was quiet, but I didn’t appreciate those biscuits.” She had grown tired of them quicker than anything else, because every time she ate one, she remembered the sweet yoghurt crackers her mother used to give her as an afternoon snack. It felt like she was being mocked every time she ate a biscuit; like it was reminding her that she’d never be able to go back to normal again.

What “normal” meant to her now was up for debate. She couldn’t pick up from where she’d left off, of course – not that she’d want to. But trying to work out how her future should go from that point was intimidating. She had reacted to her twentieth birthday with disbelief; why was she still alive, when she had never imagined herself past this age, and didn’t know where to go from there? And now she had set herself up for a future where the only certainty was that she would struggle. Fear wrapped itself around her, petting her head in soothing mockery as it giggled.

“All right?”

Len looked up at Eira’s concerned face. She took a deep breath, and nodded.

“Want to stretch your legs?” Eira asked, and set off down the walkway before Len could respond.

They circled the trailer five times before Len’s legs finally stopped shaking. On the sixth round, she began to feel a little more centred, and on the tenth, she drew Eira to a halt to resume their earlier positions. The sand rolled away from them, and she noticed with a jolt of surprise that its consistency had changed at some point. It was darker and grittier than the sand around her Waystation was.

She really was heading to something new. The feeling swamped her, and she clutched at the railing, studying the horizon and sky out of habit. There was no telling if her hard-earned experience would do her any good away from the area she’d grown to understand, but if there were any similarities at all, it seemed like they were in for at least a few hours of clear travel ahead. She wondered how far ahead it was safe to predict the weather while travelling; if it might be a topic she could bring up in conversation. No, the passengers were unlikely to know or care. Only the crew might be interested, and they would be too busy to talk. Best find some other innocuous topic.

Being sociable was a tricky affair.

She stayed out on the walkway for an hour, interjecting on occasion, but otherwise happy to let Eira chatter on. Eira didn’t seem to mind either, though she did prod a proper response out of Len once or twice. After a while, it got tiresome standing outside on the swaying platform, so they headed back into the trailer, where Eira was stolen away at once by two of the passengers she’d struck up a friendship with.

Len left her to it and retreated to a window seat with her journal.

Remembering Eira's argument about historians enjoying mundane details made her smile, but after a moment's consideration, she decided to skip a retelling of the day. Some other time, perhaps. Instead, she wrote "On Arrival" across the top of a clean page and underlined it, then began to meander through a list, thinking things up as she went.

1. *Hand in resignations – see if my arrival has to be announced to any interested parties? Probably – but who? Find out.*
2. *Secure housing at Lodge – short- or long-term? If short, where else? Basic should suffice.*
3. *Check bank account – how much buffer?*
4. *At some point, must see him*
 - *when, where, how (will planning make this less scary)*
 - *settle in first, and see him after one month. Two months maximum; no excuses!*
5. *How to find him?*
 - *Check old address? Would current owners know?*
 - *Would Institute have records? May not be accessible without proving family connection – probably unwise. Not trusting any of them, no matter what anyone says*
6. *Questions to ask:*
 - What was the purpose of those experiments?*
 - What role did you play in them?*
 - What did Amma know of them? What was the real reason you sent me away?*
 - Did you ever regret it?*
 - What did Amma mean when she wrote about your social campaigning? How did Amma die?*

Len scowled at the page and closed her journal. She wasn't sure she wanted the answer to the last question. The letter informing her of her mother's death hadn't held specifics. "An accident," her father had written. That could mean a lot of things. At least she knew for a fact that her mother hadn't been a Resonant, and therefore some of the "accidents" that Len had thought of at once – it was possible to die from

losing control of your Resonance, and it was always an unpleasant way to go – were impossible.

Never mind. There was no point worrying about it now, she told herself, and pushed it out of her mind with a determined effort.

She glanced at the other end of the trailer, where Eira was now surrounded by four others, all engaged in enthusiastic conversation. If life were a book, Eira would be a protagonist. Len would be the minor character who faded into the background and was only even present for some additional colour to the scene. She didn't think she minded. She wasn't cut out to be a protagonist, in any case. Better that the role go to someone as bright and alive as Eira was. In the meantime, just as she did with her books, Len would read and enjoy the story laid out before her – this series of tableaux, with words on words and meanings in meanings. Here was Eira's face, flushed with pleasure, and here were the secrets pressed behind white teeth and a sincere smile. Here were the introductory chapters laid out before her, and the tempting lure forward. Here was a girl with a secret known only to her reader.

Len pulled her legs up on the seat and curled up against the wall. She closed her eyes and bit back a smile.

A week later, they drove into a storm.

The caravan didn't stop as was recommended, but did slow to a crawl as they inched forward through the blinding sand. The shield rippled under the onslaught, and though Len knew that the give in the fabric was normal, it didn't make the constant movement any less alarming. She stopped looking out the window after a while. The sound of the storm was much closer than it had ever been before, and it filled her every sense, howling through her shuddering body.

Eira was taken off side-walking duty at her request. Instead, she stayed with the engineers, ready to lend a hand when necessary. She didn't have the technical expertise to perform repairs, but an extra set of hands to hold tools and manoeuvre equipment was always welcome.

Len sat in the trailer and thought.

Jin cried through the start of the storm, but even he couldn't keep up the wailing for hours. In the end, he cried himself to sleep. A harried May held him and stroked his hair and didn't meet anyone else's eyes. Both states – Jin's crying jag and

subsequent exhaustion, and May's embarrassment and shame – were ones Len was familiar with in her own person. An attack always left her burning with shame after the fact, and yet it was impossible to stop when it crept up on her.

She studied the other passengers. Shun had winced through the beginning of Jin's crying, but after a while, the expression had given way to exasperation. Anjali had groaned at one point, though the sound of the wind had successfully hidden her annoyance from May and Jin. But neither of them had complained, and the others were either indifferent or sympathetic. Len tried to focus on that.

She remembered little of her first journey out to the Waystation. Other than Kishu Aunty, there had been another passenger who'd kept an eye out for her, but she couldn't remember what the woman had looked like. She had already been refusing touch at that point, hadn't she? She wondered how she had reacted to her first storm, and how the passengers had dealt with it. Annoyance, indifference. Sympathy.

Len offered May a commiserating smile when she glanced up from Jin.

A few hours later, the sound of the storm changed. If it was anything like the weather in her area, it was petering out. Or they were driving out of it, given that unlike her Waystation, this caravan was still moving forward. Either way, it was coming to an end. She moved to a seat by a window and peered out. Between the glass and the shield, it was hard to get a proper look at the pattern of wind-flow, but it did look to be weakening. She watched and listened, and an hour later, the storm blew itself out.

The caravan picked up speed again. It felt like they were travelling a little faster than they had before, as if to make up for the time they'd lost thanks to the storm. With the screaming winds left behind them, the muffled voices of the crew outside were now audible. There was relief in them, and little stress. They must not have suffered any problems this time.

Sometime later, Eira came into the trailer and vanished straight into the washroom. She stayed there rather longer than she normally did, and emerged looking a little shaky. Len met her eyes, and felt an absurd amount of happiness when Eira ignored the other passengers and came straight over to her.

“Well, that happened,” Eira said, taking a seat next to Len. She scrubbed her hands over her face.

Len turned towards her, studying her face. There was little to be seen in her other than the obvious.

“You know how I said I wouldn’t let it stop me,” Eira said, and sighed. “I take it back. I take it all back. This sucks.”

“You made it through,” Len murmured, hoping that no one else would hear her.

Eira’s lips performed a strange wiggle of dismissal. “I suppose.” She sighed again and turned towards Len, then slouched against the back of the seat and closed her eyes. “Can I stay here and sleep?”

“Of course,” Len said.

A tiny smile touched Eira’s lips. “Wake me up in an hour.”

Eira’s breathing evened out in minutes. The trailer was silent; the storm seemed to have exhausted everyone, even though they hadn’t been doing anything.

Len looked down at her hands, folded neatly in her lap. Her gloves were still in good condition. No holes or tears. No skin peeking through. She looked up. No one was looking their way, either. Eira’s breathing had deepened, the tiniest wheezing snore announcing that she was asleep; her head lolled to the side, and her left hand lay slack on the seat between them.

Len put her hand on Eira’s and curled her fingers around. Even through the glove, Eira’s hand felt warm. She held it for as long as she dared, which turned out to be a few seconds, and then let go.

Eira’s hand looked the same as it always did. Len breathed out a quiet sigh of relief, and settled back into her seat.

Chapter 8

The caravan trundled into Waystation 12-3 on schedule. It was strange being on the other side of the reception. It was a larger Waystation than Len's, and it was manned by six people. There were two doctors, which made her wonder what their nicknames were. They couldn't very well share the name "Doc."

As it turned out, one was Doc, and the other was Dottie, for reasons that went unexplained.

After they were all registered and those with medical complaints had been checked over, they trooped upstairs to deposit their bags and claim their beds. Len took one in a corner and spread out her blanket over the top of it. Eira took the bunk above her. The bunks were stacked in twos, with more space between them than was available on the trailers. Len would be able to sit up in bed to read, without having to slouch so that she wouldn't thump her head on the bunk above.

They took it in turns in the washroom. Washing in the trailer meant using cleaning powder and brushes, since water was strictly rationed. Len's ability meant that if she didn't want to, she didn't need to wash and she'd still remain clean, but she'd dutifully disappeared into the bathroom for some time every day so that she wouldn't have to deal with any questions about her mysterious cleanliness. At Waystation 12-3, though, she indulged in a long shower, letting the hot water relax muscles that were unhappy from having been trapped in a trailer for so long.

When she emerged, she found that the upper floor was empty. There was plenty of noise bouncing around downstairs, so she presumed that the travellers were with the Waystation staff. Caravans had done that at her Waystation too, but she had never joined them. She had always remained in the far corner of the kitchen, keeping out of their way while remaining reluctantly accessible in case anyone needed something.

She stood at the top of the stairs for a long time, considering skipping dinner, before she began to make her way down.

Everyone had gathered in the dining area, which had large tureens of food set out for people to serve themselves from. The caravan was mingling with the Waystation staff. Watching from the bottom of the stairs, Len realised that this was

the same scene that took place every night at dinner. She had always thought it was the Waystation that opened itself to caravans – that was their purpose, after all – but it was abruptly clear that the caravans brought the Waystation staff into the fold as well.

She had always kept out of the way, yes, but she had always been listening. How ridiculous of her to think that she was some solitary island of queenly silence. It was, she recalled, the same thing her father had said of himself in his first real letter to her.

“What’s with that sour face?” Eira joked.

“I might be more like my father than I thought,” Len blurted out, then shook her head. “Never mind.”

“Uh, all right. Come on, you haven’t gotten any food yet, have you?”

She served herself some food, then followed Eira over to where four people from the caravan crew were sitting with Dottie. They were conversing about the use of medicine while travelling, and the limits of having a basic kit on board. “So few people need a full kit,” one was saying, and Dottie was off in a flash, riposting with, “But there are those who do, and isn’t it better to be prepared?”

“Comes down to finding a balance, doesn’t it?” Eira butted in as she took a seat.

Len sat down by her side and tried to listen to the debate. She failed, in large part because her attention was still on Eira’s words. It came down to finding a balance, did it? But where was that balance? How did one go about finding it?

Before she knew it, she’d finished her food. “Do you want more?” Eira asked.

“I’m good.” Len put her plate down, then stared at her spoon.

She’d forgotten to bring her treated utensils down, and had used the Waystation’s cutlery instead. It was a good thing she hadn’t dissolved it by accident. After having mush for so long, she’d been too busy enjoying the good food to notice her mistake.

“Have a biscuit,” Dottie urged, pushing forward a plate with two types of biscuits arrayed across it. One was the same type that Len was accustomed to, but there was another unfamiliar one as well. She chose the second, biting into it with caution. It was buttery and rich, but somehow delicate, flaking and crumbling and

melting in her mouth with an alacrity that had nothing to do with her ability. She had never tasted its like before. On that first taste, it occurred to her that she had experienced so very little of the world. It was a discomfiting realisation.

A biscuit ought not to have the power to upend your perception of your life, she wrote in her journal that night. "Amma never made or bought anything like this" – that was what I thought of instinctively. But that's made me realise that I still think of everything in terms of my parents. Every memory I have of Maraoma is filtered through that lens. The Waystation may have given me some form of independence, but it was also constricting. I can admit that now. It was salvaged only by the caravans that passed through constantly. That contact must have kept me sane all this while. I wonder how different I would be now if I had embraced it rather than trying to shield myself from everyone?

And yet it's difficult.

After what happened... it's difficult to trust. I thought it was impossible, so I tried to remove myself from the necessity. But I was also removing my ability to heal, wasn't I? I trust Manny. I don't know if I trust Doc entirely, because I spent so long not trusting her type – research scientists will always be my nightmare, I think. But I also believe that I could grow to trust her. As for Eira, I like her and I think I could grow to trust her too, but I probably need more time to say that for certain. I wonder if she trusts me? She must, to some extent, or why show me that side of her?

I've gotten side-tracked. To return to the point, I can only think of Maraoma in terms of my parents. I went to this place with them, or did that thing with them, or ate that food with them. Mostly with Amma, since she was the one at home, but there are those memories of going with both of them too, on trips to the library or the park.

And that in turns leads me to the question of what the city will be like once I get there now? I've grown; I've changed. I must have. I won't be living with my parents. I'll be making my own way. How is that going to change things? If I can separate myself from that old perceptual habit, then perhaps I really can make a new start for myself. Perhaps I really can begin to leave my past behind, instead of always dragging it after me like a ball and chain hooked to my feet.

All that introspection – from a stars-damned biscuit!

Eira talked the Waystation staff into giving her a container full of biscuits when they departed. “One per day, after dinner,” she told Len, eyes gleaming with delight. “Enough for both of us till we reach Maraoma. Be nice to end each day on a tasty note, yeah?”

The others made impassioned pleas for a biscuit or two, but were turned down at once. A week after they left Waystation 12-3, Jacob snuck into Eira’s backpack while she was at work and stole a single biscuit. The theft might have gone unnoticed but for the fact that Jin had been watching, and proclaimed it to the entire caravan that night.

“Oh, come on!” Jacob protested as Eira chased him around the camp, shouting imprecations. “It was just one!”

“It adds up! You should’ve asked for your own if you wanted it!”

Len watched with fascination. The play-fight pulled in everyone else – Jacob kept ducking behind people to use them as shields, and Eira kept demanding that the thief be turned over to her. Between them, they’d managed to get the entire caravan laughing and engaged. That kind of physicality, let alone sociability, was beyond her. She did wonder if that might change. After all, she had once thought that talking or interacting in any meaningful way with others was also beyond her. But she was now making progress in that area, so it was possible that she might be able to relearn physical contact too.

She had already touched Eira’s hand once. Her treated clothes would shield her so that she could reach out.

One day.

Change wasn’t a bad thing in and of itself, she reminded herself. It had become a little mantra she repeated each night; a consolation for the day gone by and a reminder for the day to come. She could change without losing herself.

Eira dropped onto the ground beside Len with a huff, panting in exertion.

“Secured your vengeance?” Len asked.

“For now,” Eira said. She caught her breath and nodded towards the trailer.

“Want to go back in?”

Once they were safely ensconced away from the others, Eira startled giggling.

“Did you see the look on his face?”

“When Jin spilled the beans, or when you went after him?”

“Either. Both.” Eira lowered her voice, leaning in and giving her a conspiratorial grin. “Don’t tell, but I got extra because I figured the others would want some too.”

Len blinked. “You were...”

“Eh, everyone was looking kind of down and tired,” Eira said with a shrug. “But at least that got them laughing for a bit. Here, can you hold on to this though? I don’t think they’ll try and take it off you. You can choose who to share out the extras to. Ah, I really need a shower after running around like that.” She stretched and wandered off towards the washroom.

Len stood in the middle of the trailer with the box of biscuits in her hand. It seemed like Eira’s brand of sociability was beyond her after all – it just didn’t suit her personality to put herself out there in that manner.

Do whatever’s right for you, Eira’s voice echoed in her head.

She tucked the container into her backpack. She’d figure it out later.

As it turned out, “later” was the next day. Jin sidled up to Eira in the afternoon, shifting from foot to foot for a good minute before blurting out, “Can I have a biscuit?”

May cleared her throat.

“Please,” Jin added.

“I don’t have any,” Eira said without remorse. Len tried not to look as panicked as she felt. She didn’t know what to do with children. She wasn’t sure she wanted to change that either, given that Jin had a habit of draping himself over the people he liked. “You’d have to ask Len, she’s got the lot with her now.”

“Oh.” Jin’s eyes widened as he looked over at Len. “Um.”

“She’s not going to bite,” Eira said in a stage whisper.

Jin blushed. “Ms Len? Can I have a biscuit?”

Politeness deserved rewarding, didn’t it? “Of course,” Len said, and reached out for her bag, trying to hide her apprehension.

It was, as it turned out, well-founded. Jin seemed to decide that the biscuit exchange made them friends, and thereafter included her in his rotation of adults that he spent time with. Talking to him wasn’t that much of a problem, since he was

able and willing to run with any topic given the barest direction – but she had to consciously restrain herself every time he got too enthusiastic and hugged her.

“You don’t like that, do you?” May asked, a couple of nights later. “You always flinch when he touches you.”

“I don’t like being touched,” Len said after a moment. “By anyone.”

She saw May and Jin having a quiet conversation the next morning. Jin stopped trying to hug her after that, though it obviously took great restraint on his part. In lieu, though, he started asking for stories.

“You always be reading,” he said one evening, as May tried to get him ready for bed. “Tell me story?”

“Uh,” Len said.

“Reading a lot doesn’t mean she can tell a story just like that,” May said, tugging a shirt over his head. She pulled on his arm, dressing him while he continued to fix Len with an expectant stare in complete disregard of his mother’s words.

Len racked her brain frantically in search of a children’s story. It had been a long time since she’d read anything of the sort, but at last she settled on a short one from a book of fables she remembered reading when she’d been his age. There was a prince who killed a dragon and saved a princess. Jin enjoyed the former but didn’t care for the latter. It was a standard formula, she wanted to tell him. The prince always got the princess in the end, because he deserved a reward for battling dangers untold. The thought made her queasy, so she didn’t voice it. Instead, she smiled when Jin thanked her at May’s prompting.

He slept soon after she finished the story. She lay awake and wondered about children’s stories, and the process of storytelling, and what else it encompassed other than a mere recital of the words, and what she would do if Jin asked for another story the next day.

He did.

She told him another story from the same book, about a wizard whose magic kept backfiring on him. It was the only one she could remember without a princess to be won at the end.

“I hear you’ve been holding storytelling sessions,” Eira said the next day, as they both stood out on the walkway.

“Not by choice,” Len said. She didn’t think she was very good at it, either. She was sure that storytelling ought to have more auditory interest – different voices for the characters, or onomatopoeia, or something like that – but she didn’t do anything along those lines. Jin probably only tolerated her boring recitals for lack of anything else to do.

Eira laughed. “At least I’ll be there tonight for the next one.”

“There will not be a next one,” Len protested. “I don’t have any more stories.”

“I’m sure you do,” Eira said. “You must, with all you’ve read.”

“Reading is one thing,” Len grumbled. She put her elbows on the railing and propped her chin up in her hands.

“Then I guess I’ll have to defend you for tonight?” Eira teased.

“Do,” Len said. She could think of no other stories she wanted to tell.

What did dashing heroes who performed great feats have to do with her? Jin’s request had started her thinking about all the stories she remembered reading in her childhood, but she couldn’t think of a single one that spoke to her. She supposed they meant to teach universal morals, but she was still bored of all those gallant knights, in whatever guise they wore. Actual knights. Woodcutters. Huntsmen. All there to save the tremulous woman from her tragic fate. She was tempted to come up with her own story, but she still harboured a great suspicion towards the act of sharing her words with others. For all that she’d spoken since she broke her silence, it felt like she’d said little of importance. Words were tricky things; they offered and hid meaning; they created new possibilities, for good or ill.

She stayed up a little longer that night, listening as the rest of the caravan was sucked into the word game that Eira instigated. When she felt that Jin must have fallen asleep, she excused herself and headed back to the trailer. Sure enough, Jin was sprawled across his bunk, with May sleeping on the bunk above him.

She meant to stay up and read for a while, but exhaustion dragged at her limbs and she found herself drooping as soon as she climbed into her bunk. Curling up in her blanket, she closed her eyes and listened to the muted noise outside the trailer. She fell asleep with Eira’s muffled laugh ringing in her ears.

She slept badly, the impression of a nightmare chasing her into waking though she had no recollection of it in daylight. All that was left of it was blue light and

shadows. Blue clung to her eyelids for the rest of the morning, but having lunch with Eira let her shake it off at last.

Jin didn't ask for a story that night. Len stayed up reading until lights out, and then lay awake in bed wondering when sleep would come. She knew it was the approaching city that was making her nervous. She lay awake for what seemed like hours, and fell asleep without noticing it at some point. The next morning, Eira woke her by shaking her pillow. Everyone else was awake, and hers was the last bunk to be put up.

She put it up, and went to the washroom to clean up. *There's no point worrying about it*, she told her reflection in the mirror, *so knock it off*. If only it was that easy to turn off the useless fear.

They were only a few days out from Maraoma. She felt jittery whenever she thought of how close they were. Part of her wanted to turn around and flee back to the Waystation, but that was a futile dream. It was next to impossible to cross the deserts alone. No, there was no way to take back her choice, or to change it in any way. She would have to see it through.

She wouldn't have to see him at once, she reminded herself, feeling something in her settle at the thought. She would have time to prepare. It would be okay.

Chapter 9

The quality of the sandy gravel they were travelling over began to change. She couldn't put a finger on the difference, since she wasn't about to step off the trailer for a close inspection. But it was kicking up in a more wide-spread spray as the wheels of the caravan passed over it, and even from the walkways, she could tell that it was of a different texture. The colour was also changing as they progressed, first to a dark yellow, and then lightening bit by bit. The gravel grew firmer and bigger, and began to form the bulk of the ground as the sand vanished. Then, all of a sudden, there was a cliff looming up on the horizon, and it was clear that they were almost upon Maraoma.

"I'd heard it was elevated," Eira contemplated out loud. "But I didn't think it was that high."

Even from a distance, it was clear that the cliff would tower over them. Len thought of the map she had studied before leaving her Waystation. Maraoma sat atop an irregular plateau; its edges dropped away sharply at the south, but it had a much gentler slope to the north. For the cliff they were approaching to be so dramatic, it had to be at the south of the city.

The few historical accounts Len had read suggested that Maraoma had been much smaller at one point, but after the Great Strike, it had diligently worked to expand northwards. The city now sprawled across almost the entirety of the plateau, building around the natural slopes and gradients so that the centre of the city became the highest point. Though the geography of the land constrained the city somewhat from further expansion, Len knew that there had been recent talk of building connected satellite towns to the north. She wondered if it was feasible – if those towns would still be part of Maraoma – if Resonants would be allowed to move into them.

"How are we going to get up there?" Eira asked.

"There's a kind of pulley," one of the crew replied. His name was Rohan and he'd struck up a fast friendship with Eira, but that was all Len knew about him. "They'll hook up the cars and we'll keep driving up. The pulley will keep us from rolling backwards."

Eira looked as apprehensive as Len felt.

“It’s not that bad,” Rohan assured them. “We’ve just got to make sure everything’s strapped down, since we’ll be going at a steep angle. But the view’s great, that’ll make up for it, you’ll see. Better than taking an extra week to go around and re-approach from the north.”

Len very much doubted that. She left Eira to help Rohan, and retreated into the trailer to wait.

A few hours later, Marthamma announced that the caravan would be coming to a stop soon to prepare for the ascent. There was an air of excitement about the other passengers. Len felt a little sick.

They all joined in to strap down the bags and anything else that might roll. The crew folded up and strapped the walkways to the sides of the vehicles, then disconnected the chains between them. The pulleys were at the bottom of the cliff, and Marthamma spent some time at them before waving the crew over. “There’s a message box to let the people up at the shields know we’re heading up,” Rohan explained in an undertone, before heading over to connect the pulleys to the cars. Once that was complete, the gawking passengers were asked to take their seats and belt themselves in for the duration of the ascent. They all made hasty trips to the washrooms, then sat down and buckled up in preparation.

Len had a seat by a window, and Eira was sitting next to her. The trailer began to move once more, and Len spared a moment to regret her choice of seat. Against her will, her gaze was drawn to the window and the way the ground was tipping upwards. Up, up, up, until the trailer was at an angle that should have sent it toppling backwards onto its roof. She closed her eyes and swallowed.

“We’ll be fine,” Eira murmured, low and soft and comforting.

Len made a small sound in the back of her throat. She hoped so.

She kept her eyes closed until it felt less like she was about to throw up, then opened them to peek out the window. Her insides felt like they were tumbling about like clothes in a cleaner. She squirmed, feeling her face heat, but kept her eyes on the view. It was nearing evening, and the clouds were a deep orangey-red, with yellows and purples streaked into them. Normal enough, but the steep, downward angle at which they rolled by lent a surreal air to the surroundings. It felt like they were driving

up into the clouds, like they would at any moment break through them and into the space beyond.

Rohan was right. The view was wonderful, once she got over the way her stomach was doing cartwheels.

It took an hour for them to drive up the slope. The gradient kept changing, from a terrifying almost-vertical climb to a gentle tilt upwards and everything in between. The terrain grumbled under the wheels of the trailer, the crunch of gravel giving way to the jolting bounce of larger rocks. After a time, the trailer levelled out and kept going for a minute before rolling to a stop.

Len tried to make her hands unclench. They wouldn't cooperate. She stared ahead of herself in blind panic.

"Len? Breathe."

She trembled. After the attack passed, she realised that Eira had stayed beside her, shielding her from the view of the other passengers who had begun retrieving their bags.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"Nothing to apologise for," Eira said. "I'll grab your bags."

Len waited another few moments, willing her body to stop shaking. Then she unbuckled the belt and stood up. Her legs felt weak. She took her backpack from Eira and slung it on her back, then picked up her second bag. It contained the rest of her meagre possessions. She waited until the others had all gathered their things and exited before she left the trailer as well, Eira just ahead of her.

The attack had left her feeling drained in its wake. She sat beside the trailer as Marthamma handled the caravan's registration.

Before her lay the great shields of Maraoma, wider, broader, and grander than the small Waystation shields she was used to. The bottom row of panels was an opaque grey, as was the second row that contained the air intake and filtration systems. The remainder were translucent, as the Waystation's shields had been. The panels were scratched and dented up close, though she had no doubt that the flaws would be invisible from even one ring into the city. On the far side of the city rose a field of great windmills that churned in the steady breeze.

The caravan was parked next to a small outpost just beyond the shields. Two uniformed workers were checking over the papers that Marthamma had produced with quiet efficiency.

Len and Eira's presence might cause a small delay. Eira had lost most of her belongings when she'd been separated from her first caravan. With them were her identification papers. If she was lucky, they'd get through the checks. If she wasn't, she'd be detained for a while before she could enter Maraoma proper. And then there was Len, whose identification as a Resonant and ex-Waystation employee would garner interest. But it shouldn't affect the rest of the caravan too much. At worst, Len and Eira would be held back for a time while the rest of the caravan proceeded on.

Len returned her gaze to the shields. They were awfully imposing.

"Excited?" Eira asked, taking a seat next to her.

Len opened her mouth, then closed it and shrugged.

Eira frowned for a moment. Then she leaned back against the trailer and looked up at the shields. "I'm a little annoyed by them," she admitted. "I was all set to get excited by the city and instead I've got a grey wall to stare at while waiting."

Len's lips quirked, as Eira had no doubt hoped for. "It – It will be more exciting when we go in, this way." Her voice cracked at the start, but Eira didn't call her out on it.

"Maybe," Eira sighed. She stared up at the shields. "Stars, I hope they take me."

"They will," Len said.

Eira made a noncommittal sound. They sat together for a time, until their reverie was broken by Marthamma calling out for the passengers to round up and head in.

Len got to her feet and dusted off her clothes, then held out a hand. Eira took it without hesitation as she stood. Once she was on her feet, she let go in lingering stages, giving Len a delighted smile all the while. Len looked away, her face hot and a smile of her own wanting to break out. She pressed it back and followed the caravan as they trooped forward into the access panel at the base of the shield.

The area between the shields was an odd mix of shadow from the lowest panels and light filtering in from above; together, they created a cool, dappled

atmosphere that played across their skin and clothes like a living thing. Partial walls that ran perpendicular to the panels sectioned off the processing room from the parking areas where the vehicles would be stored until the caravan was ready to set out on its next journey.

“If you’ll all take a seat, please,” said one of the workers. His voice was dry and disinterested. They shuffled into the rows of seats that filled the room. The other worker retrieved a stack of papers and began passing them out to the passengers. “Thank you. My colleague is handing out some pamphlets that you are required to read. They will help familiarise you with life here in Maraoma. Please ensure that you have read them all by the end of the day at the latest. Further questions may be directed to the relevant authorities listed in the pamphlets. Please ready your papers and come up with your belongings when your name is called.”

Len suspected that she and Eira would be left for last. She flipped through the pamphlets, reading them quickly. The first provided an overview of Maraoma’s history and current state of affairs; the second listed suitable accommodation and services that new immigrants might want to take advantage of; the third had a familiar face stare up at her under the heading “Resonance.”

She felt her heart quicken in dismay, and tore her gaze from the picture. The caption listed him as the founder of the Resonant Association for Integration and Education. Her mother had mentioned that in her letters. They’d set it up together as a face for their rights campaigning.

Resonance was caused by an accident, the text beneath explained. Simple history. The next section was headed “The Role of Resonance” and listed ways in which Resonants’ abilities were used in Maraoma. After that was a piece titled “What to expect,” which was a paragraph of assurance that no one needed to fear Resonants; that most Resonants were employed in areas that made use of their skills; that as of yet, no Resonant had ever been found to have misused their abilities, but contingencies were in place to fairly prosecute any who did. The last section was a brief description of the RAIE and its goals, which were to improve the standing of Resonants and fight for their rights, as well as educate people about Resonance.

Len folded the pamphlet, put it at the bottom of the pile, and dove for the next one with fervour. It was titled "City Attractions," and summarised areas of interest that a newcomer to the city might want to visit. The perfect distraction.

"All right?" Eira murmured.

Len nodded without looking at her. It wasn't entirely a lie. For all it felt like she was about to crawl out of her own skin, she didn't think another attack was coming on.

One by one, the other travellers were called up. Len thumbed through her stack of pamphlets a few times, then pulled the one on Resonance back out.

He looked older. It was a ridiculous observation to make. Of course he did; it had been fifteen years. His hair was grey throughout and it had thinned at the crown of his head. Wrinkles were creased into his face around his smile and his eyes and his forehead, and the skin on his cheeks and under his jaw drooped the slightest amount. The face she had spent so long resenting was the wrong face. She sighed and closed her eyes.

After a time, Eira's name was called. She opened her eyes to give Eira a small smile, then glanced around. The room had emptied while she hadn't been paying attention. She was the only one left in the seats now. From the processing counter, Jin waved at her as May handed over their papers to the worker. Len waved back with a smile. It didn't take them long to finish up and head through the access panel on the far side of the room. Moments later, her name was called. She gathered her bags and went up to the worker waiting for her.

"Ah, the Waystation employee," she greeted. "Holiday or resignation?"

For a moment, Len was tempted. But she bit back the desire and said, "Resignation."

"Fill out this form," she said, sliding a piece of paper in front of her. "So we've got one opening to fill?"

"Three," she said. She handed over Manny's and Doc's written resignations, then got to work on filling out the form. "That's their intent to leave, which leaves the Waystation empty. Best to send at least three or four at the next opportunity."

"Which Waystation is this?"

She gave its designation. "Max capacity of five," she added. "The usual requirements across the board. Someone with equipment maintenance skills, someone for housekeeping, a doctor."

"Mm. I'll put in the request. We've got a waitlist going, so I'm sure it won't be a problem. If you could indicate in the box here that your colleague will be leaving too?"

She finished filling out the form as instructed, and then spent an uncomfortable couple of minutes standing there doing nothing while the worker checked something on her computer. "Been out there fifteen years?" she asked at one point, sounding either impressed or flabbergasted.

After far too long, she stamped her papers and handed them back to her. "Get that swapped at the Immigration Office," she advised. "This is a very old version. You'll need one of the new IDs if you want to do anything in the city."

"Thank you," Len said, wondering how many changes had been made while she had been at the Waystation.

"Head on through that way," the worker said, indicating the access panel set into the inner shield.

She hesitated, glancing back at Eira. "Might I wait?"

"If you want. But wait over there."

She stepped to the side with her bags and leaned against the sturdy wall of the inner shield. On the other side was the city where her nightmare lived. Stars, what was she doing here? What had she been thinking?

When Eira came over to her sometime later, it was with a broad smile and a bounce in her step that stood in sharp contrast to how Len felt.

"They've got my stuff!" she pronounced. "The other guys came through here a few weeks ago and dropped it off with a 'maybe-dead.'" She made a face. "I hope no one helped themselves to my stuff, if they thought I was dead."

"Not if they're religious," Len said. Most caravan crew tended to be. There was something reassuring about placing yourself in the hands of a supernatural entity when you made a habit of travelling the deserts. If they had any ounce of superstition or religion to them, they wouldn't have taken anything that had belonged to a dead woman, for fear that her spirit would drag them to their early deaths.

“He’s getting my bags now,” Eira said, all but vibrating in place. Len smiled, and dropped her gaze to the ground. Lucky was living up to the nickname she still didn’t know she had. If only some of that luck would rub off on Len. Maybe that man would have died in the past fifteen years, neatly removing the biggest fear that she had about coming here.

“Things are working out,” Len offered.

“They are!” Eira said, trying and failing to repress a grin. “Though I guess I should wait till I get my stuff and check it over before I say that.”

Her bags were brought over in short order, and to her delight, she found that they were indeed untouched. Even the money she had tucked away was still there.

“At least it gives me a buffer,” she said. “Where can I get this exchanged?”

“There’s a money exchange at most Lodges,” Len said, waving her pamphlets at Eira. “Shall we be off?”

They moved towards the access panel, and Len gestured for Eira to go first. Eira pushed it open and stepped through, a delighted gasp floating back to Len’s ears. Len took a deep breath, paused for a moment to offer up a fervent hope that she wasn’t making a mistake, and followed.

Interlude III

Begin journal entry. Day 313, Year 217. Time: 1732h.

On receiving Sanju's latest letter, I find myself... my emotions are somewhat in conflict. I wish to see my daughter again, and the thought of the possibility fills me with great excitement and delight. However, the possibility that she will refuse me is also high, which in turn fills me with fear.

Typically messy. Emotions do not lend themselves to easy categorisation and study.

One emotion I am clear on. Horror and disgust that my daughter believes I condoned that vicious attack on her sanity. She thinks I permitted those bastards to verbally and emotionally harass her, to physically strike her, to conduct immoral and unethical experiments on her? They systematically destroyed her, and she thinks I agreed to that?

If that is what she has thought all this time...

I can understand why she has always refused us. My poor Lakshmi must have been tarred with the same brush as I was. I can only hope she never thought her mother also condoned what was done to her; Lakshmi would have been heartbroken to know. Bad enough that Sridevi never once replied to Lakshmi's letters, but this...

Pause recording.

Resume recording. Time: 1828h.

When we first noticed that her behaviour was changing, we didn't know what to make of it. I thought that perhaps she was just bored of going to work with me; tired of sitting around while I tried to examine her Resonance. The novelty of missing school for those sessions must have worn off. But that only explained the resistance to going to the Institute with me. It didn't address the way she had become quiet, the way she no longer found fun in her hobbies or games, the way she flinched when I came up behind her or said she was a good girl.

It was Lakshmi who brought up the possibility that she was being hurt in some way. At first, I thought it impossible. Raj was taking care of her, after all. I couldn't imagine anyone being able to get past him to hurt her. He wasn't the neglectful sort.

And then Lakshmi said, what if it's him doing it?

We thought... to be quite frank, we thought of a different sort of assault at first. It would have made sense. But when we asked Sridevi about it, she refused to say a single word.

I still found it hard to believe. Raj had been a friend for so long. And a discreet investigation turned up nothing worrisome. So I began to think that I had been unjustly accusatory, even if Raj didn't know it.

Still, when he came by my office to babysit her as usual – this time, I followed. I hung back and recorded everything I saw and heard. I justified it to myself as getting proof that he wasn't hurting my baby.

Instead, of course, I got proof that he was. Not in the way we'd thought. But he had managed to groom her as thoroughly as any paedophile would, to the point where she was afraid to speak up, afraid to talk about what was happening. Where she only knew how to do what he wanted, and keep going. That she was taught – abused! – to ensure she kept her silence about the unethical and immoral experiments conducted on her –

That sorry little bastard. I should have done more to ruin him. Somehow.

Pause recording.

Resume recording. Time: 1857h.

I did fail her. I can't blame her for thinking that. I should have kept a better eye on her, should have paid more attention, and then I might have caught it in time before he got his hooks into her.

Sanju's letter concerns me because I hadn't thought about how else Raj's silence might be interpreted. I was too relieved that his politicking had finally ended. He's been quite thorough about fanning anti-Resonant sentiment. There are far too many people who listen to that kind of rhetoric. And they're a growing group, that's the problem. People who think that they have a right to dictate how other people live. Or whether they should die.

Oh, he's careful never to use those exact words. He's never been caught saying that Resonants should be killed. But he says everything else. Talks around the topic until it's clear that's what he means, even if there's nothing specific you could pin him on. Emblematic of this damn city and its politics. Power in the hands of the few, who keep it by stepping on those they deem lesser. Before, it was the poor folk from

Lodging and Basic. Now, it's Resonants. Always a target, to take the aim off their own backs and never mind who gets sacrificed in their place.

Sometimes, I think that this city is going to eat itself up from the inside out.

Back to Raj. Sanju's right. He could be a problem. He's exited the activist stage but even if his name hasn't cropped up in those circles in the last year or so, it doesn't mean he's given up. I need to find out what he's been up to. Hopefully, nothing too terrible. I have an uneasy feeling about it, though. I hope I'm wrong.

End recording. Time: 1914h.

Chapter 10

“Why are his eyes funny?” she asked her mother. They stood in the kitchen together, waiting for the tea to steep. The indistinct murmur of two deep voices drifted over from the living room, and she strained to hear what they were saying even as she paid attention to her mother’s response.

“Funny in what way?” Her mother fished an apple out of the basket of fruits displayed on the table and showed it to her. “Do you want a snack?”

“Yes, please. All light and stuff. I can see his pupils even when the light’s not on them.”

“They’re just a different colour, that’s all. Sometimes there are people born who have lighter-coloured eyes than most do. Do you know what eyes like that are called?”

“What?”

“Cat’s eyes. Have you seen pictures of cats before?” The knife sliced through the apple with a sharp rasp that kicked up a fine spray of juice.

“I think so. Aren’t they yellow? His eyes aren’t yellow, though.”

“No, it’s just a phrase we use for light brown eyes like Uncle Raj has. Do you think they’re pretty?”

She chewed on her bottom lip as she thought about it. “They’re okay,” she said at last. “But I think Amma’s eyes are nicer.”

That netted her a brief laugh. “Thank you, darling,” her mother said. “Here, your afternoon snack. Off with you.”

She scurried through the living room and into her bedroom, letting the door shut before quietly opening it again. She sat on the floor and ate a piece of apple, listening to the conversation with great interest.

“I shouldn’t say that it’s impossible,” her father said. “But it does require a rethinking of certain principles we have held.”

“The root, I suppose,” Uncle Raj said, “is the hypothesis that it is impossible to act on more than one type of substance.”

“Quite. Even in cases where one has been found to work on multiple substances, it is at least possible to group them into a single category. That category is

typically quite narrow, at that. However – this is a list of the substances she has acted on.”

There was a brief silence.

“There doesn’t seem to be any ambiguity about this,” one of them said at last. Their voices seemed to have blended together until it seemed like only one person was talking. Confused, she leaned against the door and tried to work out who was talking from the context. She thought it must be Uncle Raj. “If it was possible to study her Resonance in greater depth, it might well open a path to incredible new discoveries. Your recent work on machine-Resonance...”

“Inspired in part by her, and in part by a certain amount of wariness.”

“Oh?”

“Before the incident, we had been making great strides in various fields – weather prediction, ground surveys. After, though? How much funding has been diverted from those fields?”

“One might argue that it is for the best, as a weather seer can give us much better information than a prediction system.”

“And when that seer inevitably dies, of old age if nothing else? How far will the system have degenerated in that time? Will we still be capable of making accurate predictions without a seer to guide us? Any system that hinges entirely on a single person – or even on a few key people – is one set up for future failure.”

“I take your meaning. Hence the drive to build machines capable of the same degree of precision?”

“Resonance demonstrates a means of interacting with the world that we previously had no knowledge of. It stands to reason that studying it will allow us to convert this highly specialised technique into something that others can use. From instinct to reason, as it were.”

“One need not always know the details of how a thing works in order to use it – but one must know its ins and outs before one can replicate it. Is that right?”

“Quite.”

“And what sorts of conclusions have you come to thus far?”

“Nothing as clear-cut as I would like. Her Resonance is a variation on mine, and her range looks quite extensive, but I would need further data before I can make

any other assertions with confidence. It will take another few weeks for the ethics board to review my proposed experiments, though.”

“You have some in mind?”

“Simple scans to study what happens when she uses her Resonance on one material versus another. Nothing strenuous for her, but I’d be particularly interested in looking at her brain activity. Electromagnetic fields, if that can be studied without hurting her –”

“That has great potential to give us answers. Wasn’t there a study recently on how our weather seer puts off a mild broad-spectrum field around their body?”

“Yes, though that same study ran into complications – the scans should have been passive, but caused her significant pain. It will be a long time before I have the data I need.”

“Modifying the scans to be safe would be a years-long project, I suppose.”

“Indeed. I will be conducting the minor experiments first. And of course, it depends on whether all Resonants put off a similar field. If so, it does offer something tangible to analyse, but I’ll have to see how the modifications go before I make any decisions about the other scans.”

“Well, there’s no hurry and of course you’ll have to start from the beginning with analysing her Resonance. Ah, thank you, Lakshmi.”

Cups clinked and for a time, there was quiet as everyone helped themselves to the tea and snacks that her mother had been preparing earlier.

“Are you planning on going back to work, Lakshmi? Now that she’s in school...”

She scowled. Their voices sounded even more alike now. She couldn’t tell if it was Uncle Raj or her father talking. A faint sense of unease crept up on her.

“Oh, I don’t know,” her mother said. “I’ve thought about it, but I’ve been out of the field for so long. I’m sure I’m all out of date with my knowledge.”

“That can be remedied. If you want to, you could always take some courses to catch up before you look for another job.”

In her room, she ate the last slice of apple as she listened. It was probably Uncle Raj talking again – her father didn’t talk like that to her mother. And neither of them had talked about her mother going to work before. There were others at her school whose parents both worked. Some had babysitters who came in the

afternoon, to watch them in the time between school letting out and their parents getting home. Others had to go to the day-care. The older kids got to stay home alone, but she didn't think her parents would allow that.

She liked having her mother around her all the time, though. If only Uncle Raj hadn't mentioned it to her, maybe she would've stayed. She slouched against the wall and pouted. She didn't like him anymore, she decided. He was a meanie.

Len woke so gradually that it was a good ten minutes before she worked out that she was in fact awake. She blinked and stared up at the ceiling, a sort of vague chagrin descending on her. She'd all but forgotten about that first meeting with him; had forgotten how determined she'd been not to like him. That determination had vanished after the next couple of times he'd visited, when he'd won her over with sweet treats and books and the way he talked to her like she was grown up and important.

She'd been so easily fooled.

Len rubbed the sleep out of her eyes as she sat up, then gingerly made her way down the ladder. After having spent the entirety of her journey here sleeping in the bottom bunk for fear of climbing up, it had been an unpleasant surprise to find that the Lodge beds were all lofted. The nervousness she'd felt had been mitigated in part by the fact that there was a safety rail to prevent falls – and by the reason for the bed to be lofted. Beneath the bed was a built-in desk and storage space. Each unit was assigned to a single person, so she would never have to share her little slice of personal space with anyone else.

Of course, there were six bed-and-desk systems in the room to offset that bit of luck, but it was the principle of the matter.

The room was empty at present. Len considered unpacking her things, but changed her mind when her stomach rumbled. She retrieved her meal card and checked the time as she headed out of the room. Right about time for dinner. She'd been asleep for going on three hours. She'd taken a shower and gone straight to bed on arriving, too physically and mentally drained to think about anything else.

The cafeteria on the first floor was entirely self-serve. There were two printers in one corner. Along the far wall was a series of stoves, and one of the cabinets above them hung open to reveal a few pots and pans.

But she wouldn't have to cook her own meals if she didn't want to, she discovered. The printers also had a couple of ready-to-eat meals. Printing cooked food! What a novelty. Her Waystation hadn't been worthy of receiving such a thing, but here it was in a Lodge, which was meant to be austere so as to encourage its residents to leave. She didn't think it was austere at all; she had more space to herself here than she did in the Waystation, and she didn't have to worry about shield maintenance, and now she had found she didn't even have to cook if she didn't want to. In her limited experience thus far, the Waystation was much more difficult to live in.

If Lodges were truly meant to provide an abstemious sort of lifestyle, what did that say about those who lived at Waystations? Or rather, what did it say about those who built Waystations to those specifications?

The meal even came with fish. She selected it with gleeful curiosity, wondering what fish tasted like. She must have had it at some point when she was younger, but she had no sense-memory of the taste. It was accompanied by rice and spinach, but the spinach looked different from anything she'd ever made. She inspected the other options while her food printed. There was one other ready-to-eat meal of beef noodles. Everything else would have to be cooked, but there was a variety of vegetables she'd never had before, and a few meats. She would have to try pork at the next meal. She supposed she could cook it the same way she did beef. It was worth experimenting with.

There were also four varieties of biscuits, one of which was the buttery one from Waystation 12-3, and *none* of which was the type she was accustomed to eating.

She bit back a laugh and scooped up her plate of food, bringing it over to where Eira was eating. The fish was a strange, pale slab, and there was a thick, yellow sauce alongside it. The spinach looked to have been blanched, and was sitting in a pool of thin sauce that trickled into the plain rice and stained it brown. It didn't look all that appetising, if she was honest about it, but at least it was something new.

"I would have woken you, but you looked so peaceful," Eira said, as Len sat down.

"It's fine," Len said. "I didn't realise how tired I was until I lay down."

"It hits you like that, sometimes," Eira said. "Hah – what's with that face?"

Len chewed and swallowed. What a disconcerting texture. "Is meat supposed to be this soft?" she asked, poking at her fish.

Eira tried not to giggle, choked on it, and spent a few moments coughing instead. "It's, yeah," she said at last. "Most types of fish are pretty soft depending on how they're cooked. I've had better, I have to say, but at least it's not travel food."

Len scooped up another mouthful and chewed. "I don't know if I like it or not," she said. The fish turned sort of mushy after a few chews, but it wasn't anything like the food they'd eaten while travelling. There was still some heft to it. The spinach wasn't too bad, and though its accompanying sauce was salty and sour and strong, it turned surprisingly mild when mixed into the rice. "I think I'll have to have it a few more times to be sure."

"You do that," Eira laughed.

"Have you decided what you'll be doing now?"

"See that noticeboard there?" Eira asked, pointing. Len twisted and looked over her shoulder, catching sight of the board on the far wall of the common room that adjoined the dining area. "It's got job adverts and things. I've been having a look and there's a few that seem decent, so I'll check those out and see if anyone's still hiring."

She might have to do the same herself. "Are the computers for our use?" There were three of them in a row on a high table along the same wall, though there were no chairs to sit at.

"Supposed to only be for work-related things, or job-hunting, but yeah. There's a notice next to each one to explain."

"I suppose I'll have a look as well," Len said, nibbling on some spinach. "But not right now."

"I thought of going out just for a bit before coming back to bed," Eira said. "Go for a walk, take in the sights, get used to things. It's nice being back in a city, I have to say."

Len shrugged. She didn't know what to make of it, and she wasn't at all sure about what she'd think about the place if she progressed inwards. She was a little nervous about the prospect, but most of that nervousness probably came from approaching her father's possible haunts. Still, some exploration of their immediate

surroundings couldn't hurt. Exhaustion had blurred her memories of entering the city. She remembered grey and brown, remembered clusters of drab buildings, but that was all. Of course, since the Lodges were right next to the processing area they had emerged from, she hadn't had the chance to see much of anything.

"I could stretch my legs," she said at last.

Eira looked pleased, and chatted on about some of the jobs she'd been looking at as possibilities. They finished their meals and cleared their plates, then stepped out of the Lodge.

Grey and brown was clearly the right impression. Eira chose a direction at random and they walked along the pale grey pavement. The entire ground was made of the same material, as far as Len could see. The flecks of darker grey had the barest hint of shimmer to them whenever they caught the evening light at the right angle.

It felt odd to be outdoors and yet have the ground be solid under her feet. There wasn't the slightest hint of give to the pavement. It was unnatural.

Len lifted her eyes away from the ground and looked up at the buildings around them instead.

The Lodge they had just left was one of a cluster; ten worn buildings, brown and drab, squatting in a loose group. Ragged pavilions dotted the empty spaces between them. Stepping beyond them revealed more clusters, ringing the inside of the shield. Len thought of her Waystation, and of how this ring of forgettable buildings seemed like another kind of waypoint. They might be within the city, but they still seemed somehow removed from it.

Or perhaps it was the sense that this entire city was out of her experience that made her feel that way. Even the air felt strange on her skin. It was cool, but at this time of night, it should have been colder despite the shields. It had been cool when they'd arrived earlier too, when it should have been hot. The temperature regulation must extend throughout the entirety of the city. It wasn't only the desert sand and wind that the shields held at bay. Even the heat wasn't allowed in. Even the weather was under control.

That was... something.

"Something on your mind?" Eira asked.

Len frowned. She'd not even been here a day, and already the city made her chafe with its apparent regimentation. But that made her think about the ways in which she fell under that regimentation; about the ways in which her life had been controlled and mapped out for her against her will; and none of those were things she wanted to talk about just then. "I wonder if I'll be able to talk when it counts," she said instead.

"When would it count?"

"When it's a specific person," Len said. She stretched as she walked, the hair on her arms standing up. She rubbed her arms in an effort to shake off the chill. She wasn't accustomed to this. Her lone jacket was going to get more use in the next few months than it had in the past few years.

"Why didn't you use to talk, anyway?" Eira asked, then shook her head. "Ah, if you don't mind explaining."

"I suppose," Len began, and then found that she wasn't sure of what to say. She folded her arms across her chest and thought. She had never had control over her own life, and that was what everything boiled down to. She had come to realise that, but she didn't know if the realisation would do her any good – she might still never escape. The words felt weighted and barbed, like they were hooked into her tongue and leaving tracks of blood as they were torn out. "I felt that even if I spoke, no one listened, and so there was no point in speaking."

They walked on.

"I named myself Silence," Len blurted. Eira gave her an incredulous look, and Len flushed. "I was young and melodramatic, I know. You can laugh."

Eira just smiled instead, looking as if she was trying to work something out. "At any rate, I don't think that's true," she said at last.

Len gave her a quizzical look.

"That you gave up speaking," Eira said. "I mean, you did, but – you did the charades thing pretty well, and you wrote notes if you needed to, yeah? Even if you weren't talking, you were still communicating, you know?"

Len thought about that. Then she thought about her first day at the Waystation, when she had refused to say a word to anyone, and had thrown about such ferocious glowers that she'd been left alone after a time, and how she hadn't

needed a single word to get her message across. She thought about the dinner she had just had, and the fact that the fish had lasted long enough in her mouth to be chewed and swallowed, and the fact that she had once again forgotten to bring her treated utensils down and had instead used those provided by the Lodge.

“Well,” Len said, then fell silent, uncertain of how to continue.

“What’s that?” Eira asked, rescuing her from her predicament. There was a large map hammered into the ground a little way down that displayed the entire city’s layout. It was built in a series of concentric rings that radiated outwards, and was further divided by straight roads into segments called districts, each of which was dedicated to a specific area such as agriculture or education. The effect, on the aerial-view map, was that of a spoked wheel.

The central core was comprised of government buildings, and it was surrounded by the richest areas, with each successive ring becoming poorer as they went. The Lodge ring that backed up against the city’s shields was the last in the series, and was dedicated to the singular purpose of providing lodging and meals for those who could not otherwise afford it. It was therefore often excluded altogether when discussing the city’s structure.

“This is so neat,” Eira marvelled. “Back home, it was a lot more higgledy-piggledy.”

“There are relocation exercises every ten years,” Len told her. She had the faint memory of one such exercise having taken place when she was young, and the much clearer memory of reading about the logic behind relocation exercises while at the Waystation. “To ensure that everything’s in the right district.”

“Is that right? They just up and move whole factories or something?”

“Apparently there’s been less and less that needs changing over the decades. These days people tend to set up in the right district to start with.”

“Makes sense.” Eira reached up and tapped an icon on the map. “Second ring, huh. Want to go tomorrow?”

Len scanned the legend at the bottom of the map and found that Eira was pointing at the city’s largest museum. “Sure.” There was also a library in the same ring; she’d have to visit it at some point, too. At least she could be certain of peace and quiet in the library.

“Gonna have to get in some sight-seeing before I find a job,” Eira said with a broad smile. “Any of these look interesting to you?”

They flipped through some of the brochures that sat in a display beside the map, and left with a few that caught their eye. They fell into a comfortable silence as they walked. The city was lit with a glow that though soft and gentle was still too bright to be natural evening light, and Len realised with chagrin that the shields must be embedded with artificial lighting. There had been streetlamps dotting the streets when she’d been here as a child, but now those were all gone.

“I suppose this is the main road,” Eira said, coming to a stop.

The road was a perfectly-shaped channel engraved into the uniform grey material of the pavement. It was the first deviation in that level surface that they had encountered since arriving.

“It is. There’s the tram stop over there.”

“Trams go round the rings, and buses go down the district lines, isn’t that right?”

“That’s what the pamphlet said. We can take the tram round to District Five, then take the bus going in to get to the museum.”

Eira stretched and exhaled, looking ahead for a long moment before shaking her head. “Then we’d best get back and get some rest. It’s been a long day.”

Despite having just woken up from a too-long nap, Len found herself nodding in agreement. She was still tired. It would take more than half a day to shake off the effects of over a month of hard travel.

“Look at them,” Eira murmured, as they turned away. “If they’re that nice all the way out here, what’s it like inside?”

Len glanced at the taller buildings that stood across the road. Even from a distance, it was obvious that they were far more decorative and better maintained than the Lodges were.

“We’ll find out tomorrow,” she said. “Come on.”

Each district had a small museum and information centre that recorded both that district’s history and upcoming plans. The large National Museum, on the other hand, was concerned with the larger picture: the formation of the entire city, and maintaining a record of history from before that formation.

This was the museum she had visited as a child. She knew that there was a planetarium, but she remembered nothing else of the exhibits. She had thought that it would be nice to refresh her memory, but as they travelled into the city, she began to think that might have been an erroneous conclusion. This wasn't refreshing an old memory – this was making a completely new one.

She recognised next to nothing.

The tram ride to the education district had been tolerable. Lodges passed by the windows on one side of the tram; much smarter and more varied buildings passed by on the other. The style of architecture was different with them – they had ornamentation on their facades, and they weren't all simple rectangles. There were terraces with sloped roofs and timber pavilions and decorative wall lamps made of black metal and clear glass. They were still fairly cramped and somewhat worn, since this was the poorer part of town, and Len had thought: ah, it's like Aunt Nisha's house. She had visited with her parents a few times, and the general look of the place seemed largely unchanged from back then.

Then they boarded the bus that would take them inwards. The architecture became ever more ornate and grand, rising to greater heights with each ring so that the buildings seemed to tower above their lesser counterparts. It was only a practical consideration, Len told herself. The dome of the shields and the rise of the land naturally lent themselves to shorter buildings near the circumference, and taller ones in the middle.

It still felt like the government buildings were looming above everything else, keeping a watchful eye on the rest of the city.

At the third ring, a middle-aged woman boarded the bus. She wore a shimmering dress that swung around her in flowing waves, and her face was powdered to a flawless sheen. Her eyelashes swept up and down in a dramatic sweep when she saw Len; then she pursed perfectly painted lips and hurried past them, to the back of the bus.

"Hello to you too," Eira mumbled.

That about summed it up. Len stared out the window. "Is it the next stop, or the one after?" she asked.

"Haven't the faintest."

They alighted at the next stop, found that they were mistaken, and decided to walk the rest of the way. There were yet more people like the lady on the bus; perfectly coiffed and tailored, noses wrinkling at the simple clothing that Len and Eira wore.

“Just me, or do they act like we haven’t showered in weeks?” Len whispered.

Eira laughed. “Well, some of them. But there’s others that just look curious, and others that don’t care one whit. I think it’s most of them that don’t care, really.”

Len took another look around. There was a couple whose gaze passed right over them. A man walked by with his nose in a book. One person sitting by the corner was watching them, but was also watching everyone else who walked by.

“Oh,” Len said, feeling simultaneously embarrassed and more relaxed.

“Eh, there *are* people who act like snobs,” Eira said. “That lady just now. And that always feels horrible when they’re like that to your face. But let’s try and focus on nicer things, right? That’s how I deal with it, anyway.”

“Seems less stressful than how I react,” Len conceded. She just didn’t know how to stop giving those people’s condescending gazes more weight. It was easy for Eira to say – she was getting dismissive looks for not being well-dressed enough, but Len was also getting some disgusted looks for the tattoo that marked her as a Resonant.

She’d try and follow Eira’s example for now, and hope for the best.

They managed to find the museum without fuss; it was easily one of the largest buildings in the area, and there were signs everywhere pointing visitors in the right direction. Eira held the door open for her as they stepped in. Len wrapped her jacket tighter around herself at once. It was even cooler inside than it was outside. A large map was on prominent display in the entrance area.

“Looks like it’s chronological,” Eira said as they studied it.

Each room on the first floor covered a certain time-frame, and they all seemed to connect to bring visitors through Maraoma’s history. The higher floors had more specific exhibits.

“Let’s work our way through the first floor,” Len suggested. “Then we can decide what else we want to see. I know I want to go to the planetarium.”

“Sounds good.”

The exhibits started with a room labelled “Pre-Strike,” which summarised the state of the city before the Great Strike had changed so much about the world.

Eira seemed fascinated by a restored picture of the old city, which she lingered in front of for ages; of more interest to Len was the next section, which described how the city had been built and re-formed from its previous state. The idea of building something new from the remnants of the old intrigued her, and she found herself hoping that there would be a more detailed exhibit on the matter.

Unlike the bright, open, first-floor exhibits, the second-floor exhibits were housed in individual rooms. The first room they stepped into was dark, and they both had to pause for a moment to let their eyes adjust before they started following the arrows that glowed dimly on the floor.

Eira jumped when a portion of the wall lit up as they walked past, revealing itself to be an inset screen that began playing a video. “Oh,” she said, putting a hand to her chest. “How does that work?”

“Motion sensors, I think,” Len answered.

“We don’t have anything like that back home,” Eira murmured, staring at the screen in fascination. She seemed more intrigued by the automatic playback than the content of the video.

“What, motion sensors? That’s been around forever. Since before I left.”

“They’re not joking when they talk about how advanced Maraoma is, huh? We had touch-sensor screens, but nothing like this.”

Len tucked her hands into her jacket pockets. “I remember what it’s like,” she admitted. “But it’s weird having this around me again.” The Waystation hadn’t had anything like this level of technology. She was no longer used to the technology she’d grown up with – and of course the city must have improved on things since then.

“We can learn together,” Eira declared. “Here, what’s this? Space?”

The exhibit was an overview of what was known to exist beyond their planet. The scale of it all seemed even larger than Len remembered from her childhood visits; age and a mature mind didn’t appear to help in comprehending such vastness. An adjoining room displayed a replica of the asteroid that had caused the Great Strike. Placards and pictures hung on the walls, explaining what had happened.

The asteroid had struck in deep waters, triggering tsunamis and earthquakes that had destroyed large swathes of land. The earthquakes had in turn spawned violent volcanic eruptions that had left the earth swaddled in ashy clouds for months. One natural disaster had followed on the heels of another, razing cities to the ground. So much had been destroyed in the aftermath of the Great Strike; the period of chaos that had followed was referred to as the Lost Time, for the lack of knowledge about what had happened in those years. The trail of destruction was fascinating to follow from a distance, but she pitied those who had had to live through it all.

The site of the crash was contaminated with harmful radiation, a placard read. It was presumed that the asteroid carried radioactive materials that in turn contaminated the land around it. No extensive study was carried out to determine this supposition, as the people of the time had to focus on rebuilding. By the time the cities found self-sufficiency, investigating the crash site became low-priority for science. It is therefore unknown if any life remains in the area.

It seemed unlikely, given the harsh conditions suspected. But Len had lived in the desert for long enough to know that life could be found even in the most implausible conditions.

She doubted that anyone would undertake to find out, though. After the Great Strike, the composition of the atmosphere had changed to let in harmful radiation from space, so the people then had had to build shields against that in a hurry. Those same shields would have protected scientists against the radioactive land, but it wouldn't have done anything about the difficulties involved in travelling out there.

Scientists these days were used to being comfortable. Cities were largely self-contained; travel between them was undertaken either by poor people seeking better opportunities elsewhere, or by courier caravans that were paid extra money for their service, in the same manner that Doc and all other Waystation doctors were. There was little reason to look beyond their borders to investigate what else lay out there, unless it directly affected them in some way. Doc's work was considered ground-breaking in part because no one else had bothered conducting such an extensive investigation into radiation before – and anyone who tried to study the impact site wouldn't even have the relative comfort of a Waystation to stay in.

Len looked up from the last display and found that she had lost Eira. She dodged the other visitors and exited into the hall, looking around.

“Excuse me,” someone said from behind her. She turned, startled, and found herself looking up at a tall man. Her first impression of him was how spare he was in his entirety; his hair was thin and grey, his bones pressed up against his skin, and the angles of his face were razor-sharp despite the wrinkles on it.

Her second impression was that he seemed in some way familiar, but the large, dark glasses that perched on his nose covered up too much of his face for her to figure out why.

“Would you happen to be related to someone called Lakshmi, by any chance? Lakshmi Matthias. You look very much like her.”

Len shook her head, taking a step away as she fought to find her voice. “I don’t know anyone by that name.”

The corner of his lips quirked down, but she couldn’t make out anything else about his expression. His glasses hid too much. “I see. My apologies, then – I had thought you might be her daughter. You really do look a lot like her.”

“Sorry I can’t help you,” Len said, and nodded to him before scurrying away. She ducked into the first room she saw and waited for a few minutes, until it was clear that the stranger wouldn’t be following her in. She felt light-headed, and everything was spinning. Closing her eyes in a bid to stop the dizzy swirl, she leaned against the wall and tried to remember how to breathe.

It took a minute, but she managed to get herself under control without falling victim to a full-on attack. She focused on inhaling and exhaling in a regular pattern as she pushed off the wall and stumbled towards the door.

A peek outside revealed that the stranger was nowhere in sight. Relieved, she stepped out and cautiously investigated the other rooms along the hallway, finally finding Eira in the third one.

“There you are!” Eira greeted. “Sorry, I got distracted by the exhibits and then I couldn’t find you, so I figured I’d hang around in one spot.”

“It’s okay.” Len scooted a little closer to Eira, glancing around.

“One more I want to look at, if you don’t mind?” Eira asked.

Len nodded, trailing in Eira's wake as they headed to yet another room. After that run-in, she didn't much feel like looking through the exhibits any longer, but once she saw what was in the room, interest began stirring in her. It was about the formation of the city, which as it turned out had gotten to its current state through systemic demolition and re-construction.

The earthquakes had torn up the old ground, leaving behind untrustworthy gravel and loose soil. When the land had finally settled, it had been vital to create a safe foundation before rebuilding. Maraoma had sunk a lot of money into researching and producing the current materials and techniques used to create its current foundation. The old had been stripped away and steadily replaced with the new; the district-ring structure had fallen into place along the way.

The details of the construction made her wonder how hard it would be to create another city somewhere else. Given all that talk about creating satellite towns connected to Maraoma, was it too much to hope for that another city altogether could also be built where none stood previously? Somewhere new, where she could start over.

She pushed the thought away. There was no point in such idle contemplation. She needed to focus on the present first.

"Planetarium next?" Eira asked. "Unless there's anything else –"

"No, nothing," Len interrupted. Her head was full to overflowing with everything she'd learned, and she was still shaky from her previous encounter – why, *why* had she reacted so strongly to that man, and why did it feel like she knew him – so the planetarium sounded like a good way to wind down.

It was on the top floor, and easily the most popular exhibit, going by the number of people milling about. Dots of white and red and blue twinkled above them, and a white-grey sphere gleamed on the domed roof. Eira dove into the crowd, heading for the model planets. Len found a corner to hide in, and stared up at the sky. So that was what they had looked like, those ephemeral things called stars. To her, and to many people, they required a degree of faith to accept, unseen and unknowable as they were; there was a reason people swore by stars, as they did by the gods. She thought of the night sky she knew, of ominous movement in unbroken darkness. Light reflecting from the planet surface often caught the shifting clouds, but

never became lighter than dark grey. It made her think of enormous beings prowling the sky, vast and terrifying as the desert.

But it was only dim in the planetarium, not dark. Outside, a plaque had said that the light from the displayed moon and stars was limited to the actual light levels that would have been present in the time before the Great Strike. Even accounting for the soft light around each exhibit, that meant that nights on the world before had been bright and safe. She knew that the moon's visibility changed from day to day, so perhaps the nights would have been darker on some days. Perhaps they would have been more like what she knew to be night. Still, the thought that such a luminescent night sky could ever exist was difficult to believe.

A lot of possible things seemed impossible to her.

Chapter 11

There was a café outside the museum that did some delicious little cakes. A sign in the window invited applicants to walk in for an interview, so Eira took the opportunity while they were there to give it a shot. She emerged a while later with a smile.

“They like me, but I need to get my identification in order first,” she said. “I think I’ll do that now. Do you want to go anywhere else?”

“I need to sort that too,” Len said. “Let’s swing by the Lodge, get our papers.”

They duly did so, then headed for the nearest Immigration Office branch. It was a small but well-kept building. Len and Eira took a number each, then sat down to wait.

“I hope this doesn’t take too long,” Eira whispered. “There’s all sorts of nightmare stories back home about this sort of thing.”

“Pretty sure the same stories exist here,” Len replied. “Isn’t bureaucracy the same everywhere?”

Eira sighed. Len hid a grin.

It was another forty minutes before Len’s number was called. “I returned to Maraoma recently, and was told I needed to get a new ID,” she said, presenting her papers. The worker behind the counter took them without a word, staring at her face for a long moment before he turned his attention to her papers. He frowned at them and tutted under his breath as he began typing on his computer.

“Resonance level?” he asked, skipping right over the question of whether she was a Resonant or not. Then again, everyone here would know just by looking at her. They was no chance of escaping notice like she had in the Waystation, where at least some of the caravans had been made up of people who didn’t know that Maraoma marked its Resonants for easy identification.

“Managed,” she replied.

He squinted at her, his upper lip curling, then returned to typing.

She pressed her lips together. Her Resonance wasn’t at the preferred “Controlled” level, but “Managed” was still considered safe. Of course, there were always those who thought that only those with perfect control should be allowed out

in public. Or those who thought that no matter the level of control, Resonants shouldn't be allowed to mingle with the rest of society.

Or did people still think that way? She needed to get caught up with the legal and social changes over the past decade or so. Reading the always-out-of-date news as they got it at the Waystation wasn't enough for a full picture.

"Previous residence?" he asked.

"Waystation 11-2."

He squinted at her again, then returned to typing. She dropped her gaze to his table, feeling her cheeks heating up. His desk was small and tidy, with the computer tucked away in one corner, and a small printer and paper mulcher in the other. There was an unfamiliar wooden device set atop the printer.

"Current residence?"

"Eight-Lodge, Block 3, Room 7." She didn't look up to see what his expression would be this time.

A few more keys clacked, and then the printer began to whirl. A moment later, there was a small card sitting in the output tray. The worker retrieved a rigid board from under his desk and slid it under the floppy card, then inserted the board into the wooden device – a holder of some sort, then.

"Press your thumb here," he instructed. She lifted her hand and he corrected, "Take off the glove first."

"It's 'Managed' because the glove stops me from dissolving anything I touch," she retorted, and managed to look at him for long enough to take in the flinch. An uncharitable sort of glee filled her as she yanked off her glove and pressed her thumb into the card, leaving an impression in the malleable material. It didn't seem like she'd dissolved anything. She slid her glove back on and lifted her head, keeping her back straight.

The worker unlatched the holder and slid the board under the desk. When he pulled it back up a few seconds later, steam curled up from the edges of the card. He went back to his computer for a minute, then shuffled her papers together.

"These will be destroyed," he said. He avoided her eyes as he put the papers through the mulcher. "All the information is now on that card. It provides identification and access to some parts of the city so it is recommended that you

carry it wherever you go. If lost, you may purchase a replacement at any Immigration Office branch.” He slid the now-firm card off the board and pushed it over to her, then thumped a button on the side of the counter. She heard the familiar chime calling up the next number.

She picked up the card and gave him a polite nod. Her ears felt hot, and her stomach was in utter turmoil.

Eira wasn’t done yet. Len leaned against the wall and willed her stomach to settle down. She’d won that battle, hadn’t she? He’d backed down. But it didn’t feel like a victory.

It was another twenty minutes before Eira came up to her. “All done,” she said, displaying her card and some sort of small device.

“What’s that?” Len asked.

“The reader,” Eira said. “To process the card? In places where they don’t have the tech to read it themselves. Or so we can check it ourselves, I guess. Didn’t you get one?”

“Nope. What else did you get?”

“Just these. The rest was explanations of how they worked and how to set up a portal hub and get addresses and all that sort of thing.”

Len closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “What’s a portal hub?”

The first manager tried to brush everything off as a mistake on the worker’s part. Len would have left it at that after getting her own reader, but Eira refused to back down until a second manager was pulled in to assure them that the worker would be reprimanded.

“What an asshole,” Eira complained afterwards. “Making a mistake is one thing, but that manager wasn’t even going to do anything about it.”

“It wasn’t a mistake,” Len said, shrugging. “You can get by without a reader, right?”

“Sure, but it’s mandatory to give one out anyway.”

“Mostly so that you if you’re leaving you can access your information even at another city. But Resonants can’t leave.”

Eira glanced sideways at her. “At all?”

“Only to Waystations under Maraoma’s control. He probably didn’t see the point. Or didn’t care about making things easy for me.”

“Oh. And that first manager too. It’s because you’re a Resonant? That’s why they didn’t care you didn’t have all the info you were supposed to get?”

“I might be wrong, of course.”

“Let me try and remember... I guess the main thing is getting a portal hub? You set it up on the computer, and it’s your personal little hub that you can connect everything else to. If you’re getting a phone, the number connects to your hub, or if you’re setting up addresses for letters and things. You can control what other people see, and apparently you can make a lot of it anonymous if you want, but the idea is to keep everything in one place so it’s easy for you.”

“Should we set it up when we get back?”

“Yeah. Seems to be big here. Can’t get a job if I’m off-grid.”

The computers at the Lodge were different from the old thing that Len had used at the Waystation, but it was easy to get used to. It had been designed to be intuitive, and within minutes, she and Eira were navigating it with ease. Once they’d set up their hubs, Eira brought up a new page.

“Here, we can sign up for a free address with this,” she explained. “A virtual one, I mean, for letters. And this is the address to give people if they ask.” The directions on the screen were simple, and Len began to go through the same process on her hub. “And the letters come here. Oh, it’s called a Memory Box, that’s cute.”

Len created her Memory Box, then adjusted the settings so that everything was private and no one could see the address linked to her hub. She wondered how anonymous the system truly was; someone with enough clearance could surely find the connections no matter how she tried to hide them. The only way to disguise it would be to get a separate hub altogether – but since the hubs were tied to their official identification, that was impossible. They were only allowed one per person.

Which meant that the government could probably keep an eye on everything she wrote if they wanted to. She wished she could feel disturbed by the thought, but instead she only felt resignation. She was a Resonant; privacy didn’t exist for her. The only surprise was that even non-Resonants would put up with the same loss of

privacy. She supposed that people could get used to anything, given enough incentive.

“And done,” Eira announced. “What now?”

“I’m tapped out for today,” Len admitted. “Maybe we could do a tour tomorrow?”

“The agricultural tour sounds fun. It’s still early – I’m going to go back to the café and see if I’m getting that job or not.”

“See you later.”

The room was empty when Len retreated there. She stood by her desk for a moment, thinking that she should do something productive, but unable to come up with anything. She took a shower in the end, and then climbed into bed with a book. She’d only just arrived at Maraoma; productivity could wait.

The book was an old one that she’d read multiple times already – now that she had the chance, she would have to visit the library as soon as possible, to get something new for once. In the meantime, she let the familiarity lull her into relaxing. The last coils of tension from the earlier encounter finally unwound themselves, and by the time Eira came bustling into the room, Len was feeling herself again.

“I got the job!” Eira exclaimed.

“Congratulations!” Len leaned over the side of the bed, holding on to the railing. She still wasn’t used to being off the ground like this, but she thought that she could get used to it in time. “When do you start?”

“Next week. I told them I’d only just arrived and they said they’d give me a little time to settle in first. We’ll have to get in plenty of sight-seeing before I start.”

“Starting with the agricultural tour?”

“Yeah! And I think I saw something about a Shield Walk?”

Len climbed down from her bed, and the two of them went through their collection of brochures, settling on a rough plan for the rest of the week. Eira chattered away the rest of the evening about what they might see, and Len found herself looking forward to sight-seeing with a degree of anticipation that surprised her.

It had been a long time since she’d had something to look forward to. That was something she’d lost, living at the Waystation all this while.

After breakfast the next morning, they took the tram to the agricultural district.

The pictures in the brochure had been fascinating, but they did no justice to the wall of green-grey glass that greeted them when they alighted. It towered over them; Len thought it must be at least five or six stories high. Nothing was visible through the near-opaque glass, and since it ran along the entirety of the path until it curved out of sight, that meant that almost everything was hidden from view.

The only exception was the small table near the tram station where they'd alighted. A plump woman was seated at it, looking over at them now and then.

"Is this where we sign up for the agricultural tour?" Eira called out as they approached.

"That's right," the woman said, perking up. Her smile faltered for a moment when she saw Len, but she put it back on in a hurry. "Next tour's in fifteen minutes. Let's get you signed up. IDs please?"

She scanned both their IDs, then moved over to the glass wall. "This way." She inserted her own card into a small slot and a glass door slid open, startling Len with how well it had been camouflaged.

Several people were milling around the small waiting area inside. Len was astonished to notice that there were potted plants placed along the walls at regular intervals, but a closer inspection revealed that they were fake. She wondered if there were any real ones anywhere. Even if there were, she supposed that she wouldn't get to find out; they'd be something precious, wouldn't they?

The vegetables and fruits her mother had bought had been labelled fresh, but that only meant that they had been printed within the last ten hours. She had read that actual fresh-grown produce did exist in Maraoma, but she had never so much as seen it before, let alone eaten it.

Another door opened and a different woman walked in. Despite being dressed in loose working clothes, the smile on her face was nothing short of professional. Len took one look at her and decided that she had to learn how to put on a face like that, one that gave nothing away.

“Welcome to the agricultural district,” the woman said. “My name is Kai, and I’ll be taking you on a stroll through the district today to learn more about what we do here.”

She ran through the rules in brief, then opened a door at the far end of the waiting area and gestured them through into the stairwell beyond. They trooped up three flights of stairs before emerging onto a sturdy wooden platform.

Len’s eyes widened as she stepped through. It wasn’t desert heat, but it was much warmer than the rest of the city. And it was *wet*, like the air itself was clinging to her. She took off her jacket and slung it over her arm.

“Wow,” Eira said, ineffectively fanning herself with her hand.

“This is what we call the growth area,” Kai announced over the hum of machinery. She strode to the front of the group and began to lead them down the walkway connected to the platform. “As you can see, it’s where we grow the majority of our simple plants, which are later converted to food powder to be sold.”

A series of large containers sat beneath them, each holding some sort of green substance. A worker nearby was processing one of the containers, revealing that the substance was only a thin layer atop a pool of water.

“We’ve optimised the amount of nutrients needed to grow these weeds,” Kai explained. Len held onto the railing and peered into a vat, squinting until she saw the tiny leaves in what had she had thought was a uniform mass of green. “They’re constantly monitored to ensure they’re growing properly, and since they grow fast, it’s only a turn-around of about four days before they’re ready to harvest. You can see one of my colleagues doing just that over there. The machine skims off the top layer of growth, but leaves enough for it to be repopulated.”

“So it’s on a rotation?” one of the other tourists asked.

“That’s right. What you see here is only a fraction of what we have. You’ll notice the walls around this section? There are twenty sections like this in total, and they’re harvested in turn. Each section also runs on a separate regulation system so that if one fails, it doesn’t mean a total loss. We harvest enough weeds each day to produce fifty kilograms of food powder, but even so we’re only just keeping on top of Maraoma’s needs.”

There was a murmur of surprise.

Kai led them onwards as she explained how the climate regulation system worked and how the machines functioned. One volunteer from their group was allowed to try and process a vat under the supervision of a worker, and though he had to be corrected a few times, he returned to the group with flushed cheeks and a pleased look.

The next section was where the processing happened, through machines that were in some instances multiple stories tall. They explained why the outer enclosure was so tall. They were also much noisier than the machinery in the growth area, and Kai had to shout to make herself heard over them. The harvested weeds were sorted by type, dried in specific ways to retain their nutrients, then rolled through drums that broke them into fine pieces. Each type of weed was measured out and combined with the other types in precise dosages before being further ground and processed. The familiar green-black powder that came out at the end was unrecognisable from the plants it had once been.

“This is so amazing,” Eira whispered. “I’ve never seen how it’s made before, have you?”

“Nope,” Len replied. Her mind was still stuck on the fact that little living things had to be ground to a shadow of their former self to become useful to the city. There was a metaphor in that somewhere, she was sure – or she might be getting carried away with philosophising again. She smiled wryly. “I never really thought about where it came from. This is quite the eye-opener.”

The last section of the tour was even more of an eye-opener. Len stepped through the door and was greeted by rows upon rows of green.

“Oh,” she breathed.

“Welcome to our real crops,” Kai said with a smile.

She was clearly enjoying the way they’d all stopped in their tracks to stare. “Several samples of plants and seeds were preserved by our ancestors in the aftermath of the Great Strike, and we are reaping the benefits of their forward thinking now.”

Len drank in every word as Kai explained how they took care of the plants. Growing them in soil was impossible; the seedlings always died within a week, if the seeds sprouted at all. Analysis had proven that the issue was two-fold – there were

minerals in the soil that stunted plant growth, and the soil contained none of the right minerals that were necessary for it.

Instead, the plants hung in the air throughout the greenhouse. Their bare roots were misted with nutrient-rich water on a regular basis. Even if it wasn't the way they naturally grew, they still flourished under the hydroponics regime.

And their very existence made Len's head hurt. It was worse than trying to understand a starry sky, because the living proof was right in front of her.

So it was possible to exist, to live, even when everything around you said you shouldn't.

Len slipped her hand into Eira's before she could talk herself out of it; Eira started at first, but then her fingers closed around Len's, and they walked hand-in-hand for a minute before Len finally pulled away. It was getting easier to initiate. In time, perhaps she'd even be able to accept someone else initiating contact with her.

The oddest sensation of calm descended on her as she investigated a chilli plant with tiny red chillies hanging off it. They were the type that exploded with heat, that her mother had often used in her cooking. She wondered if her mother had ever come on this tour before, if she had known that there were real chilli plants here, that she could have bought them from specialist shops, if she would have done so and if that would have made her food taste any different.

"And now we've got a little treat for all of you, before the end of the tour," Kai announced. "This way, please. Take a seat."

The treat was fresh vegetables, cut into bite-sized pieces. Len bit into a cucumber and found that there was in fact a difference in taste, compared to the printed cucumber she'd had in her salad the previous evening. It wasn't a huge difference, but this piece somehow tasted more crisp and fresh. She ate a piece of tomato, and a leaf of lettuce, and a slice of carrot. They all had that same vivid clarity to them.

It was like Eira's water. Clean and fresh and real.

Len thought of the process of change, and of Eira's assertion that change was natural, and of plants that grew in the air, and of what it meant to adapt to circumstance without losing yourself. Then she bit into a last piece of tomato, and refused to think of anything else.

Chapter 12

When Eira began work the next week, Len found herself at a loss for what to do.

It had been easy, thus far, to go along with Eira's cheerful suggestions. Despite talking their plans through together, Eira had led the way the whole time, allowing Len to use her as a shield and making decisions for them whenever Len felt overwhelmed. Faced with the prospect of making those decisions herself, Len balked.

She spent the first day moping. On the second day, she went walking around the outer rings, but on returning to the Lodge, realised that she remembered nothing of what she'd seen. On the third day, she considered looking for a job, and just as quickly relegated the idea to the bin. She was nowhere near ready for such constant human contact.

But a schedule would be nice. Structure seemed like the sort of thing that would help her find her footing. After a few more days of struggling, she found the structure she'd been looking for in the library.

The creatively-named Main Library in the second ring was massive, housing both a large collection of books, magazines, and newspapers, as well as an up-to-date array of computers and media devices. Len spent an hour or so on the computers each afternoon, familiarising herself with the technology. It was miles better than the computers at the Lodge, which in turn had been much better than the computer at the Waystation.

It was getting to be annoyingly obvious how much she'd missed out on by staying there. She'd known, in an abstract sort of way, that the city would have the latest technology. But it had never before seemed real to her.

Now she knew, and that worried her. If she got used to Maraoma being better in these aspects, then she might well end up expecting it to be better in other aspects. Not just better technology, but better treatment in society.

That wasn't likely to happen anytime soon, if the way people still went out of their way to avoid her was anything to go by. She tried to keep Eira's words in mind, and focused on those who didn't react to her at all. At least they did exist. That was a start.

And humans were never going to be perfect. That much was made clear in the time she spent poring over the library's books. One section was dedicated to books that had survived both the Great Strike and the Lost Time, and she had initially been captivated by the foreign world they described. Lush greenery and brilliant blue skies. Strange, elegant creatures she'd never heard of. Unbounded cities that breathed real air. Then she found the books that talked about pollution and hunting animals to extinction and slavery and prejudice and nuclear bombs, and realised that everything had a dark side, no matter how attractive it seemed at first blush.

She retreated to the children's section after that; it was much less stressful.

The search for a story that didn't have a damsel in distress took longer than she thought it would, but she finally found one with a promising blurb. It was written by someone who shared a name with her father. She ignored the coincidence and opened up the book.

There was a prince, quiet and reserved and uncertain of his words, arrogant in the unknowing way someone who'd grown up in an insular environment could be. But there was also a princess, cheerful and bright, even brash, with an easy-going disposition and a kind heart that hid her unbending spine. She taught him strength and caring, and he taught her creativity and logic. They were a partnership that was reflected in the writing; they both got equal billing, and one was never made to seem better than the other.

If Len ever looked Jin and May up, she was bringing this book along for Jin.

She pulled out the next few books in the series, settled back into the chair, and was at once flabbergasted when she read the blurb for the second book. Reading it proved her suspicions correct: it was about Resonants. They were called the Marked in the book, but it wasn't subtle about the analogy. The princess discovered a village full of people with strange abilities, and reacted with fascination. When she told the prince about the village, he thought at once of how this village might be of use to the kingdom. Because it was a children's story, it ended with the princess teaching the prince that if he was to accept this village into the kingdom, he must treat them as equals to any other village.

Disquieted, she shut the book. There were children's book about them now, were there? At least this one was a positive portrayal. She wondered what else there

was about them. Part of her didn't want to know, but the rest of her knew she had to find out.

The third book in the series was a different edition. The first page carried a picture of the author, along with a short biography. She stared at her father's picture for a long time. Then she put the books back on the shelf and went back to the Lodge.

Unfortunately, she wasn't able to hide for long. It was Eira's day off the next day, and she found herself being pulled along in Eira's wake as they went shopping. She tried to pay attention to Eira's relaxed chatter, but it was hard.

"So what's wrong?" Eira asked casually, inspecting herself in the mirror as she held a dress against herself. She didn't look Len's way. "Seems like something's bothering you?"

Eira was somehow always able to tell these things. The advantages of being a social person, Len thought grumpily.

"It's nothing."

"It's something."

They browsed through another rack of clothes in silence. Len wondered if it would be possible to get her clothes treated directly now, instead of having to wear the treated bodysuits her parents sent her underneath. She'd have to see about that. She didn't know the details of where her bodysuits were made in the first place, or even how they were embedded with anti-Resonance to prevent her Resonance from inadvertently working on her clothes. It had been one of the last things her father had said; that she could write them at any time if she was outgrowing her clothes, and that he would send her more.

She'd never written – initially, she'd had half-baked plans of taking apart and remaking her bodysuits when she outgrew them, but the first package had arrived a year into her stay before she'd reached the point of giving in. Afterwards, Doc had managed the orders for her, so Len had never had to write her parents.

"I'm scared to meet my father," she whispered. "I don't know if I can forgive him for... before."

Over dinner earlier in the previous week, she had given Eira a hesitant, bare-bones account of what had happened to drive her to the Waystation. Eira hadn't pressed for details then, and didn't now. "Is there a reason you have to forgive him?"

she said instead. "If you have to deal with him for something, well, it's possible to be polite but not want anything else to do with a person."

"I want answers from him."

"You don't need to forgive him for that."

"He might deserve it. I might have been thinking the wrong thing all this while."

"Well, get your answers and then decide. There's no time limit."

"I don't know if I'm ready."

"There's no time limit for that either," Eira told her. "But I think sooner's better than later. You'll drive yourself mad worrying about the what-ifs if you leave it too long."

At that, Len was finally able to laugh. "Probably."

She didn't look her father up after that conversation, but she did at least manage to get herself out of the Lodge even when Eira went back to work. At the library, she spent more time on the computer, reading through every research paper she could find on Resonants.

There had been a few studies done on the "Know yourself" mantra that most Resonants tried to live by. Though no firm conclusions had been drawn about its accuracy, the anecdotal evidence was strong. It was always when a Resonance lost faith in themselves in some way that they lost control of their Resonance, often to the point of death.

If she upended her life in the way she was thinking of, her Resonance might eat her up from the inside out. But the research didn't mention what would happen if she accepted that upending. Would that keep her safe?

It took her a month to get through every publically-available paper that seemed halfway relevant to her. She also borrowed some for Eira, who devoured them with an alacrity that spoke volumes about why she had come to Maraoma. It must have been hard living in another city altogether, with no community and no knowledge about what she was.

"A lot of it's stuff I – I sort of knew?" Eira said, when she'd finished the last paper. "But that I hadn't really thought about in those terms before. Like I knew it subconsciously but not consciously."

“It was the same for me when I started reading about it,” Len admitted. That process had begun at the Waystation, so she’d been able to catch up quickly and help Eira along when she struggled. “It’s a good thing. Understanding how it works... it’s like I can understand myself a little better now.”

“And once you understand where you stand, you can move on to changing things?”

“Yes,” Len said, surprising herself with how quickly the word leapt to her mouth. “I’m not ready just yet, but I will be.”

“I just wish there was more,” Eira lamented. “I want to know more about Resonants themselves, you know? The people, not the ability.”

“There’s not much on that. As much to protect their privacy as anything else, I think.” Len studied Eira’s face. “Is there something specific you want to know?”

“General curiosity,” Eira said, then shook her head. “No, it’s just.” A half-growl, half-huff escaped her throat and she flung herself to the side of her bed, sliding down the ladder and running to the door. Len watched as she locked it and returned at a slower pace.

“Can I?” Eira asked, gesturing at Len’s ladder.

Len shuffled backwards on her bed with a nod.

“You’ve never asked me where my Resonance comes from,” Eira said. She settled onto Len’s bed, leaving a foot of distance between them but leaning in so they could keep their voices down.

“I always thought you’d tell me if you wanted to.”

The comment earned her a small smile. “See, when that accident happened at the Institute,” Eira began, feeling her way through the words, slow and cautious, “they rounded up all the affected scientists and got them help and all. Forget all the fighting and stuff for now. In the end, they got them all help. Right?”

“Right,” Len said, feeling sure that the answer was wrong.

“Except. While they were so focused on helping the scientists – being that the scientists were the important ones, you see – what happened to everyone else in that building? The cleaners, the maintenance staff, the security?”

“Wouldn’t – someone must have noticed them...”

“Sure, and a handful were executed by the government before the scientists realised that they might be next on the chopping block.” Eira’s voice was calm and unhurried. “That was enough for them to work together, I guess. They yelled loud enough and got the executions stopped. But you don’t think that anyone else who’d gone unnoticed would’ve jumped to admit a Resonance after that?”

“Was it one of your parents?”

“My mother. She can’t make water like me, but she can manipulate it some. Pull clean water out of polluted. Could’ve been a huge help to Maraoma, I’m sure, except she was so sure she’d die, she left for Tejara just as soon as she could.”

Len frowned. “And you came back here knowing that?”

Eira flexed her fingers in Len’s sheets. “Mum always wondered if she’d done the right thing, leaving. It ate at her. She had friends here she left behind, and she doesn’t know if they’re okay. And now she’s sick and can’t make the trip here, so I thought if I could come and look into it that might help her.” She laughed ruefully. “Except I didn’t quite think it through. I didn’t realise how... they just don’t like outsiders at all. There’s no way to get in.”

“It’s insular.”

“It’s a damn fort.” Eira waved across the room at the papers strewn over her own bed. “They’ll put out things like that, but the kind of information I’m after? That’s under lock and key.”

“What *are* you after?”

Eira hesitated. “Well, you know. Where they are, how they’re doing.”

“And you’ve been trying to find out what the Institute knows about them?”

“Yeah. What are you thinking?”

“Have you tried looking them up outside of the Institute? Just in general, through the portal hubs?”

There was a long silence.

“I should probably do that,” Eira mumbled, her face scarlet.

Len giggled. “I can help, if you like,” she offered. “If you’ll give me your list of names, I’ll go look them up at the library tomorrow while you’re at work.”

“That’s a better idea than what I had,” Eira sighed. “I was thinking of visiting the Institute – they do these short guided tours to showcase what they do, you know? Sort of like museum tours?”

“You could still do that. It might give you an idea of what their practices are now.”

Eira pursed her lips, a slow frown furrowing her brow. “That something you’d be interested in finding out? Yeah? Okay, I can do that. Let me figure out the timing.”

Eira booked herself in for a tour in four days, on her day off, then found her list of names to give Len. Once that was settled, they agreed in mutual silence to drop the topic for the time being and spent the rest of the evening in casual conversation with their room-mates.

The next day found Len standing in front of her small mirror, trying to convince herself that she wouldn’t find anything untoward when she investigated Eira’s list. She honestly didn’t believe she’d find anything terrible – but it was bringing up bad memories all the same, and she couldn’t help the sliver of fear that was carving through her.

“Oh, just go for it,” she whispered to her reflection. “Can’t you save the worrying for an actual problem?”

She let the anger propel her out the door of the Lodge, where it turned at once to sheepish dismay when she nearly bowled over a passer-by. “Sorry!” she gasped, stepping back.

“It’s fine,” the passer-by said, regaining his balance. He glanced at her and his eyes widened. “You’re – I mean, nothing, sorry.”

He hurried off, leaving Len standing in front of the Lodge with flushed cheeks. It was a good minute before she regained the presence of mind to move, but took only two steps before stopping again.

She had automatically thought that he had reacted to her Resonant tattoo, but –

In retrospect, that face had seemed familiar to her.

She couldn’t quite place where she’d seen him before, and ended up puzzling over the question all the way to the library. One of her parent’s friends? One of her

friend's relatives? He was an older man, going by his balding head and wrinkling skin, so it wasn't anyone she'd grown up with.

Whoever it was, the last she could have seen him was fifteen years ago. She couldn't picture a younger version, and so she couldn't work out who he might be.

She alighted in Ring Two. At the bus stop was a sign that pointed to the major attractions in the ring. She stopped in front of it, sightlessly staring at the marker for the museum, remembering the man she'd encountered there weeks ago.

They were connected. She wasn't sure how, but that man was somehow related to the man she'd just knocked into.

She still remembered how much that first man had scared her. This second one hadn't made her react in the same way, but she *knew* that they were tied together, so that meant he was someone suspicious.

She put two fingers over the pulse-point in her neck. Fast, and speeding up. She began walking towards the library, stepping in time to her breathing, counting them off and elongating both until her heart began to settle under her fingers.

The library was never crowded at this time. She let the quiet wrap around her and sank into the seat at her favourite computer terminal; it was tucked away into a corner, the screen was angled such that no one walking by could see it, and even the security cameras wouldn't catch it. When she'd first started coming here, she'd been embarrassed by the thought that anyone could see her amateurish fumbling on the computer. Finding this terminal had solved that problem, and even though she was well acquainted with the technology now, she still liked the privacy it afforded.

For a few minutes, she stared sightlessly at the computer screen. Then she straightened up and got to work.

There were twelve names on Eira's list, each with a brief description of details that her mother had known about them. Len stared at the screen for a moment, trying to figure out how to go about this.

Might as well start with the obvious. She typed the first name into the portal search and began clicking through the results, eliminating those that didn't match the personal details she'd been given.

The first name was a wash; she couldn't find anyone who fit the description. So was the second, and the third and fourth. On the fifth, she finally hit a possibility.

Ms Adila was working as a lifting supervisor at a construction company called. She had two addresses listed, one of which appeared to be work-related, as well as a phone number. Len made a note of the details and moved on to the next name.

She only found one other name through the portal search, so she moved on to investigating their names through every other avenue she could think of. Still, she only managed to turn up four of them in total by the end of the day. The other eight remained elusive.

She'd taken a quick break for lunch before getting back to her research, but she couldn't stay any longer since she'd planned on catching up with Eira over dinner. Len moved to turn off the computer, then hesitated when she caught sight of the portal search.

If she didn't do it now, she knew she'd end up talking herself out of it for weeks or months more. She opened up the portal search again. This time, her search turned up a result at once.

Before her sudden resolve could fade, she wrote a quick letter – barely three lines long, since she couldn't think of anything else to say – and sent it off to the listed address. Then she turned off the computer and fled.

Eira had already started on dinner when she arrived back at the Lodge. Len pitched in to help put the rest of the meal together, and was surprised to find that the sense-memory of her mother didn't ache quite so much with Eira's voice there to distract from it. They sat down with their food, and Len pulled out the list she'd made.

"It's not much," Len admitted, sliding it across the table before digging into her food. "I'm only certain about these two, to be honest. The other two might be someone else altogether – there was nothing to confirm it either way. I was thinking you might talk to this Hanin or Adila yourself? They might know where the others ended up."

"It's more than I started with," Eira said. "Thanks for this, seriously."

"Not a problem. So what are you going to do?"

Eira dropped her gaze to scan the short list once more. "Like you said, I guess. Maybe I'll drop them both a letter. If I can figure out something to say that doesn't sound weird."

“You could just say that you’re a daughter of a friend of theirs, and you’d like to reach out on behalf of your mother, who hopes they’re doing well.” Len shrugged. “All true, and you can save the rest for when you see them in person.”

“Will you come with me?”

Len raised an eyebrow.

“If I manage to get a meeting with either of them,” Eira elaborated.

“I’m not sure how useful I’ll be, but sure,” Len said, after deliberating the matter for a few moments. It would depend on the response that Eira got, after all; she’d have some time before that happened.

As it turned out, both women responded to Eira within a few days. She wrote back asking if they could meet up, but hadn’t gotten a response from either of them by the time the day of the Institute tour rolled around.

“Stop worrying,” Eira said, her exaggerated look of exasperation ruined by the tone of affection with which she spoke. “I’m not out to steal secrets or anything. I’ll be fine.”

“They’d never let you go if they find out about your Resonance,” Len muttered, fidgeting. She’d tried to come up with a list of questions she wanted answered about her own experiences – but failed, which left her to fret uselessly about Eira being discovered during the tour.

“I have no intention of using it or talking about it,” Eira insisted. “Come on, give me some credit.”

Len waved her off, hands fluttering. “Fine, fine. Go. Just come back as soon as it’s over.”

“I will.” Eira leaned in towards her, then darted out of the room, calling a goodbye as she went.

Len stayed where she was, trying to process the quick kiss that Eira had dropped on her cheek. Her mind was still whirling minutes later, so she climbed into bed and hid her hot face behind a book.

She still hadn’t managed to read more than five pages by the time Len returned, over an hour later. Fortunately, the prospect of learning something new about the Institute did the trick and distracted her from her circular speculation about what that kiss had meant. Unfortunately, Eira hadn’t learned much of anything.

“It was even more of a sanitised tour than I thought it would be,” she reported with mild disgust. “Just general, this is what we do, here’s a lab, conveniently empty except for a researcher over there doing stuff you can’t look at, here’s another lab with a convenient experiment set up you *can* see, but that’s boring as anything and that a kid could probably do.”

“I suppose it’s a bit much to hope for secret documents being left out in plain sight.”

Eira barked out a laugh. “Yeah. Anyway, they did mention the review process for experiments, since you asked about that. I didn’t even have to ask – it was part of the spiel. The sum of it is, what you said happened to you? Couldn’t have been legal.”

“You know that for sure?”

“There’s an Ethics Review Board that has to approve any experiment that involves people,” Eira explained. “They’re not affiliated to the Institute either, so there’s no claims of bias. They do similar work for all sorts of organisations. Doesn’t seem like that sort of thing would’ve gotten past them.”

“What’s to say it didn’t?” Len retorted. “Who decides what’s appropriate?”

“Sceptical as always,” Eira laughed. “Mm, I thought the same thing, so I asked for an example. He said, suppose you want to study the effects of a particular diet on people. First, you have to prove it’s not a danger and the participants can resume a normal lifestyle afterwards without trouble. If there’s any risks, you have to make them clear from the start, and you can’t do anything that you *know* is life-threatening. If there’s some sort of harmful effect you didn’t foresee, you have to stop the experiment right away and do your best to help reverse the effect. It’s only after all that’s worked out that you’ll get the go-ahead from the Board, and if you try and start without their approval, that becomes a criminal offence.”

She picked up her glass and gulped down some water. “So basically, what I figure from hearing everything that guide said? For what happened to you, either he bribed people to make it happen, or he just ignored them altogether and did it in secret. Either way, it’s illegal. Does that help?”

“I’m honestly not sure,” Len admitted. She interlaced her fingers on her lap. “I looked him up and – he didn’t do any jail time. He lost his job and he had to pay a fine, but that was it. It was only a tiny article in the news. Not important at all.”

Eira grimaced. “One other thing I thought of – the laws as they are now might be different from what they were back then. He might have wiggled out on a loophole that’s since been closed.”

“Good point.”

If that was true, it would also mean that if anything happened *now*, they were less likely to get away with it. Not that anything would happen, she told herself. That was just her lingering paranoia talking. She wouldn’t be duped in the same way again and she had no intention of performing tricks for anyone. If anyone even tried, of course, which surely there was no reason to.

“Anyway, that was about all I got. The tour wasn’t much use, to be honest. It all seems legit on the surface, but of course that’s not saying much for what it’s like underneath.” Eira leaned back in her chair, pushing away from her desk and spinning around in slow circles. “If we wanted anything else, I guess we’d have to talk to the people who actually work there. But if there’s anything sketchy going on, I don’t know who we could trust to talk to.”

Neither did she, Len thought, but perhaps it was time she tried figuring that out.

Chapter 13

Even his voice was different.

She had found a video of her father on a portal site dedicated to activism. His voice was nothing like what she remembered. She didn't think it was entirely because of the distortion caused by recording – either time had changed it completely or she hadn't remembered accurately to begin with.

Given that two men in her memories shared the exact same voice, she thought there might be something to the latter possibility.

It was surreal watching him stand in front of a small crowd, delivering a speech in a strong, carrying voice. "We should not think of Resonants in terms of usefulness," he said. "We are people, and to think of us in terms of utility is to deny our personhood. We are more than what we can do."

Someone from the crowd yelled in agreement, provoking a smattering of applause. Her father allowed it to continue for a moment before pressing on. "But utility is the only lens through which we are seen at present. What happens to those deemed not useful enough? Shuttled off to be forgotten."

Being in a Waystation wasn't being forgotten – was it? Or perhaps it was, as far as city dwellers were concerned. Waystations were only necessary for travellers; otherwise, there was no reason to think of them or how they were run.

"At present, there are forty-eight Resonants working at Waystations," he continued. "Twenty-three are on a waitlist. In the meantime, they live in an encampment just beyond the Lodges in District Nine. There is one building there that was built specifically to house Resonants. The overflow is contained to the Lodges. No Resonant is allowed to purchase a house even in Basic without first getting approval from the government. Resonants need government approval to buy or rent a house, to apply for a job, to get married, to leave the city. Would you appreciate that level of scrutiny in your lives? Or would you protest?"

He lived in Middle Housing, according to the brief profile she'd seen in his portal hub when she'd looked him up. Did that mean he'd had to get approval for that? Had she avoided an embarrassing refusal because she'd determined to stick to

the Lodges for now? Would she have been turned away for being who she was if she'd tried for Basic Housing?

"We have made great strides in the past ten years in our campaign," her father announced. "Resonants are no longer subject to constant supervision or curfews. Laws forbid discrimination against Resonants. But we still have much further to go. This is only the beginning."

"He sure knows how to work a crowd," Eira commented, as the audience began applauding and cheering.

Len closed the video mid-cheer. "Mm-hmm."

What she remembered of her father was a man who'd been reserved and ill at ease in a crowd. A man who disliked public oration and thought that people should fix their own problems instead of making them everyone else's problems. A man so focused on his work that he had no time for anything else, including his family.

A lot of impossible things seemed possible here.

There was a reply.

She'd been putting off checking her Memory Box for the past week. Given the date and timestamp on the letter, it had been sitting in her Memory Box for the better part of that week.

Biting her lip, she opened it. *I am free most days after six, it read, which is when I finish work. If that timing does not suit, let me know when you wish to meet and I will arrange to have that time free.*

Of course it suited; she had no obligations, so any time would have worked. Nevertheless, she wrote back requesting a meeting after lunch in three days' time, which would place it right in the middle of his work day. The father she remembered would never have entertained the idea. This version of her father replied with a confirmation and a suggested location before she'd even closed her Memory Box. She wrote back an agreement, turned off the computer, and spent the rest of the day trying not to panic.

The next day, Eira and Len set out to meet Adila, who had invited them to tea at her house. Len had almost backed out of the meeting at the last minute, but Eira

had given her a pleading look and she'd given in. She'd managed on the caravan; meeting someone in a setting like this, where she couldn't just avoid interaction until she felt comfortable with it was the next step.

"Here we are," Eira announced, checking the number on the door before knocking. "Excited?"

Len narrowed her eyes.

"If you need to, you know, say you've got another appointment to get to, you're sorry to run, it was nice, bye," Eira whispered in a rush. "I'll back you up, don't worry."

Nice of Eira to give her the out – it almost made up for being guilted into doing this. Len relented, and just in time; the door opened, and she pasted a smile on her face.

"You are..." the woman said, looking between them.

"Madam Adila?" Eira asked. "I'm Eira, and this is my friend Len. I wrote you..."

"Ah, yes, yes, come in," Adila said, opening the door wider. "Take off your shoes. Yes, yes, I was waiting. You will tell me how my Nadia is, yes? Here, girl, come inside."

Len forced herself to not to react as Adila put a hand on her shoulder and propelled her into the house. It took a moment to catch her breath.

The living room was bright and open, if a little on the small side. Adila ushered them to the large sofa placed by the window, then bustled off to the kitchen, re-emerging a few moments later with a tray of snacks and drinks.

Conversation, as it turned out, was easy to deal with when you had a friend willing to carry it. All Len had to do was smile, nod, and interject an occasional sound of agreement. She barely had to listen. It wasn't until Eira had eased her way into the topic of Resonance that Len started paying attention.

"Ah, those days, we were all so confused," Adila said. "I tell you, girls, we all thought we were going mad. You should have seen when it hit. Half of us fainting in the corridor. Half of us scared out of our minds. All these things we knew but didn't know how we knew." She sighed, deep and resigned.

"It must have been hard," Eira ventured.

“Hard, yes, very hard.” Adila looked lost in contemplation for a moment, before coming back to herself. “Here, eat more. You both, so skinny.”

Len’s mother had always played dutiful host, but had never been quite this insistent about feeding her guests. It was like encouraging them to eat was Adila’s way of calming herself. It was a pity Len didn’t have anything similar to calm herself with; her nerves were starting to get the better of her. She nibbled on a biscuit, and found that its edge dissolved as it brushed her lips, her bite vanishing within her mouth before she had the chance to taste it.

She didn’t take another biscuit.

“My mother always said it was more than just the scientists who got Resonance,” Eira said carefully.

Adila rubbed her hand over the red band that stretched across her face. “They only talk about the scientists,” she said. “But it was everyone in the building. I tell you, I was mopping the floor, and then I was lying on it knowing ah, here is a crack, here is a fault, deep underneath. And then I think, if the bosses see me lying here I will be fired, so I get up and I pick up my mop and when they come around, yelling about people with weird powers, I say nothing. Not then. Afterwards, yes, but that time, I was too scared.”

“I’m sure that there were a lot of people who felt the same way,” Eira said. “Mum said it was total chaos back then. And people died? Were executed?”

Adila laughed without humour. “Today they say it was executions. Because of safety issues. They were dangerous so security had to make a choice.”

“They weren’t, were they?” Len blurted out.

“Of course not. Just confused. Lost in their minds. Ming was scared and he was yelling about it, about all the things he could see. When you panic, you lose control of your Resonance, you see? He didn’t know that. The more scared he was, the worse it got. He wouldn’t stop yelling when the guard told him to, so the guard shot him.”

There was a long and awkward silence.

“People didn’t understand back then,” Adila offered at last. “These days... well, more people understand. But not everyone accepts.”

“You lose control of your Resonance when you panic?” Len whispered, her eyes fixed on the plate of biscuits.

“Yes. That’s what we think.” Adila was clearly referring to her small group of non-scientist Resonants. To their personal experience rather than the ivory tower explanations that others came up with. Her face was full of sympathy as she looked at Len. “No matter what type of Resonance. You will never be in control if you fear it. You must learn to trust it. To trust yourself.”

She only heard pieces of the rest of the conversation. “Yes, she died a few years ago. Poor Celestia. It was Resonance trauma... oh, he killed himself early on. Family did not like it, you see... Your mama was a smart one to leave... he had a rough time but is better now... no, she’s in the Lodges. Refuses to use her Resonance but seeing as everyone knows...”

Len tried, but found that she couldn’t focus. Her mind kept drifting away, trying to remember all the times she’d tried practicing her Resonance at the Waystation. She couldn’t have been afraid all the time. But it was true that she had never trusted her Resonance to stay under her control. Not since she had killed that man despite the fact that she hadn’t wanted to.

But that was most certainly a moment when she’d been blinded by fear.

A moment that had dogged her for the rest of her life, in more ways than seemed obvious.

At some point, they took their leave of Adila and went back to the Lodge. Len thought that Eira might have been trying to start a conversation, but she couldn’t pay attention. Everything seemed distant and muted, as if coming to her through a damping fog.

She sat at her desk and stared at the wall for a time.

Sound returned first, her ears clearing up enough to track the noises in and around the Lodge. Then sight, and with it the clarity to realise that she’d had another attack. It had been much more insidious than the usual sort she was used to having.

There was no one else in the room with her. She’d have to find Eira and apologise to her later. But first, she needed to deal with the confusing welter of emotions that Adila had left her with.

She retrieved her journal from the drawer, opened it to a clean page, and hesitated. Her mind was so full that she didn’t know where to begin. She pressed her pen to the paper, scratched out a few uncertain words, and continued, picking up

speed. Her mind bled through her pen and into her notebook. Her thoughts spilled past the confines of her head, splattering white pages with longing and terror. They narrowed, shrank, crammed themselves into the shrinking space, till at last she reached the last page. She tore her bag open and pulled out a new notebook, pen storming across fresh pages.

She wrote about being here, and about how she hurt, and about how forgiveness sometimes seemed like an ugly word. She wrote about shields, and about the artificial cool of the city, and about how keeping things out meant never seeing the truth of them. She wrote about how truth was the other side of lies and how the two were tangled up in each other, roots clawing through so that neither side could claim to be untainted. She wrote about loving and fearing the same person and the ache that such conflict brought, the grief of not knowing if either was justified. She wrote in her blood, in the throb of her arm, and when she stopped at last, it felt like her mind had been cleared of all clutter, if only for a moment, like a cleansing fire had blazed through her and burned away the clinging black slick of paralysing fear.

She stared at her blood on the pages and breathed. Then she lifted her pen and began writing once more, this time slow and unhurried. *Amma was the only religious one in our family. She taught me about her beliefs, but never demanded I follow them. I don't hold the same beliefs, and I'm sure I've forgotten a lot of what she used to tell me, but there's one thing I still remember. A statue she had. It was of a woman standing on a flower. The goddess of fortune and prosperity, if I remember correctly. The flower she was often associated with represented consciousness and self-actualisation.*

Words I didn't understand, back then. She told me that the flower was known to have grown in adverse conditions and was capable of thriving even in polluted waters. It was thus thought to represent the idea that purity could flourish in even the worst situations. But if the flower went extinct in the aftermath of the Great Strike, what does it mean for that metaphor? Time changes even the things we think are permanent.

For the better or worse?

But I have to believe that it's still possible to keep moving forward even when we have to change our perceptions in particular ways. The religion still survived, after

all. The stories still exist. And perhaps some have been lost and we'll never know – but parts of it live on, and in living can continue to grow. To thrive.

Change isn't necessarily a bad thing. Eira said that, and I've been clinging to the notion all this while to get through – through everything – but I think it's only now I'm really starting to understand it.

The sound of the door opening made her look up. Eira didn't notice her at first, focused as she was on manoeuvring around the door while carrying a tray with a large pitcher and a couple of glasses on it. It was only once she'd managed to bump the door shut with her hip that she caught Len's eye, stopping for a moment before continuing forward.

"I brought us some drinks," she said cautiously. "Lemon water. You said you liked that when you were, um, upset. Right?"

Len nodded, closing her journal and putting it aside, then pushing her chair back to make room. "I'm sorry about earlier. I wasn't expecting..."

"Nah, it's fine," Eira said in clear relief. She set the tray down on Len's desk and poured out a glass, offering it to Len. "I'm just – I had no idea what I was doing, you know? I hope I didn't make anything worse."

"I don't think so. I don't remember reacting badly to you. Just. Memories." Len sipped at the lemon water, relieved when the familiar tart flavour settled her further. Lemon tablets never tasted quite like proper, printed lemons, but their artificial tang was something she'd grown to rely on while at the Waystation.

"Well, that's good. I mean, not good that it happened, but good that I didn't mess up."

Len hid a smile at Eira's uncharacteristic fluster. "Thank you," she said. "All I really want at times like that is some quiet and privacy so it can pass on its own. You got me here, so... thank you."

A part of Len wondered if this would be the one step too far that would make Eira decide that Len was just too much trouble to bother with. It wouldn't be strange. Len's past meant that she carried a lot of extra baggage that most people didn't have to contend with. Anyone who got close to her in any way would inevitably find themselves carrying part of it at times.

But Eira dragged her own chair over to sit down beside Len, poured herself a glass of lemon water, and pulled her into a hesitant conversation about what they should do on her next day off. Tip-toeing away from the meeting they'd just had, from any hint of discussion about Resonance, from questions about what she'd do when she met her father. Her desire not to upset Len again was clear, and Len obliged by meandering along the safe conversational paths that Eira picked out.

Eira relaxed after a time, and though she fussed a little the next day about leaving Len alone, she allowed herself to be cajoled off to work without too much bother. Len spent the day in the Lodge, making, discarding, and redoing plans. Her mind kept flying through the possibilities through dinner with Eira, through her night-time rituals, through her unsettled sleep.

She still hadn't decided on one when she finished lunch the next day, but there was only half an hour left to the time they'd agreed on. Her journal and a pencil went into the small sling-bag she'd bought recently, and she headed out before she could talk herself into standing him up.

The café was small but well-kept, in the third ring of the office district. A chalkboard outside proclaimed that the special of the day was a cold cut sandwich with mushroom soup and orange juice.

"Would you like to try our special, miss?"

She started. The café worker gave her a polite smile. "Our juices are hand-pressed in-house, and our customers always say good things about our sandwiches! Of course, we have other options if the special doesn't appeal."

"I – I'm. Uh, thank you," she said, and ducked inside, wondering how long she'd been standing outside staring at the sign. The employee called a cheery welcome as she stepped in, then closed the door behind her. She glanced back and saw him start to polish the windows outside.

The café wasn't crowded, so she saw him at once, seated in the far corner in plain sight of the door. He'd already spotted her, and his keen gaze made her shift in discomfort. She looked back at the menu that hung behind the counter instead. No lemon water for this establishment – it was proper lemonade, presumably made from freshly-printed lemons.

She ordered an orange juice instead. It came far too quickly, and then she had no reason left to delay. She took a sip as she headed over to the table. Sharp and sweet, gliding down her throat the same way that words left her tongue. Hidden blades raking into tissue, soft honey soothing the wounds, leaving behind a mild burn that dulled in seconds but remained constant. *Still here*, a reminder.

“Sridevi,” her father said as she approached, then hesitated. “Or Len? Do you prefer that now?”

She glanced at him, then looked away as she sat down. “Len, please.” She still had to use her given name on forms and such, but it always felt like another person. Despite the dramatics involved in her initial renaming, she’d grown so accustomed to ‘Len’ that it now felt more like her real skin than what she’d been named as a baby.

She had seen the pictures, so she was prepared for the changes that time had wrought on him. The pictures didn’t do any justice to that sharp gaze, though. Just like he’d been before. And his voice most definitely wasn’t what she remembered it to be. It was round and mellow, with a tiny rasp underlying it, quite unlike the sharp, cold tone she remembered. She peeked up again and was startled to see the edges of his eyes soften.

“How – have you been well?” he asked, putting his hands around the mug he was nursing. It smelled familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it. Not something she’d had at the Waystation, and not something she properly remembered from her childhood. She pushed the stray thought away, forcing herself to focus. She didn’t remember him ever hesitating in such a way. The realisation that he was as uncomfortable as she was made her relax, in some strange way, and the journal she’d brought no longer felt quite so heavy as it had before.

“Well enough,” she said.

Something like hope flared in his eyes. “I see. That’s good.”

She sipped at her orange juice in an attempt to hide the fact that she had no idea what to say next. For all the recent practice she’d gotten in making conversation, nothing had prepared her for speaking to her father. Her tongue still felt tied up in knots.

He cleared his throat. “You intend to stay here for good?” he asked awkwardly.

“I don’t want to go back to a Waystation,” she admitted, after a moment of consideration. Sometimes she did, when things got a bit too much for her. But those were passing moments now, and even when she was going through them, she knew she’d come out the other side. She didn’t need to hide anymore. It had been good for her in the beginning but she’d long since outgrown it, even before she knew she had. “Why did you send me there?”

“Because it seemed the safest place for you,” he said after a few moments. “After those kidnapping attempts – we didn’t know where else would be safe.”

“Kidnapping,” Len repeated.

“Yes. The first was from your school, remember?”

She shook her head.

“After we found out what was going on... do you remember, someone once came to pick you up from school? He said I’d sent him because I was busy and couldn’t make it?”

She didn’t remember.

“The school didn’t let him because he wasn’t on the approved list,” he explained, his brow furrowing. “They called me up to check. I was just another ten minutes out at that point, but when the secretary went back to talk to the guy, he’d left. Never did find out who it was, but it was obvious to me and your Amma that someone had tried to take you.” He sighed and turned his cup around in his hands. “As I remember it, you didn’t have any contact with him – we only told you a bit of it afterwards, as a warning to be careful of strangers. I suppose it’s not out of the ordinary that you don’t remember.”

Was she now expected to take him at his word? Or investigate events at her old school, hunt down the secretary of the time and see if she remembered a single incident from over a decade ago? How far should mistrust or trust be extended?

“I don’t remember that at all,” she said. “Was it – him?”

“As I said, we don’t know. We filed a report, but the investigation didn’t go anywhere. Your mother and I were suspicious, though. Then we went to the park a few weeks later and I’m sure you can appreciate that your mother and I were keeping rather an eagle eye on you? We spotted someone watching you with rather too much interest, and looking quite shifty when he saw that we’d seen him.”

“How cloak and dagger.”

“It certainly didn’t seem real. Then the court cases began, and when it became clear that he wouldn’t get off completely, he made some. Some rather ugly threats. Towards you. People tried to tell us that he was just venting, but when it was all taken together, we were afraid for your safety.”

“So you sent me away. To a place where you’d never have known if someone came for me.”

“Paradoxically, a Waystation was the safest place for you. It was far enough out of the way that he would not be able to get to you. If he did try to pull anything, it would be immediately obvious. Of course, we sent someone we trusted with you, to ensure that no one could simply make off with you as part of a caravan. It was only intended to be for a few months. A year or so. Until we could ensure that he’d given up.”

Len drank her orange juice in silence.

“But of course, it took longer than we thought. The court case alone dragged on for four years. It was another two before we felt that he must have given up, and it would be safe for you to come back. And by that time, you’d just become an adult. We wrote to ask you to come back, but – well, clearly, you didn’t. And we had no rights over you any longer, so all we could do was keep asking.”

She thought of telling him that she’d never read their letters. If she had; if she hadn’t clung to her resentment and refused to listen for so long, would she have returned sooner? Would she have gotten better faster? She’d named herself Silence in anger that her voice had always seemed to go unheard, but when it came down to it, she wasn’t any better at listening, was she? It was something you had to work at, and if you gave up, that was it.

“I didn’t want to come back then,” she said instead. “They sent someone all the way out just to give me this tattoo. I didn’t like it.”

Her father nodded, his hand coming up to rub against the red bar across his own face. “At least you got the numbing cream. Didn’t you? Good. They didn’t have those when I had to get mine.”

She made a face.

“Quite.”

A brief silence descended over the table. It didn't feel as suffocating this time.

"Do you," she began, then hesitated. "Would you mind telling me what happened to Amma?"

His eyes flickered and dulled. "A traffic accident. She was crossing the road when she was struck by a bus."

Len flinched.

Her father took a long draught of his drink. His voice was still hoarse when he spoke. "It was quick, apparently. She wouldn't have felt much."

"Helpful," she mumbled.

"It isn't, is it?"

She drained the remainder of her juice. "I shouldn't keep you," she said. "You have to get back to work, don't you?"

"Ah, yes." His eyes darted over her face. "Would you be willing to meet up again some time? I'd very much like to keep in touch."

She stamped down on the instinctive denial as she got up. "Maybe. You can write me."

"I'll do that. Oh – oh, wait. I brought something –"

He fumbled through his pockets and produced a slip of paper with two brief phrases scribbled on it. "Your mother's ID and the password for her Memorial Box."

"Her what?"

"You know what a Memory Box is? Yes, well, they're frozen when a person passes on. Converted to a Memorial Box, you see. Most people leave a copy of their wills in there. That sort of thing. She set different levels of privacy for different people – anyway, you can have a look at her work. If you want. Her journal's in there."

Len tucked the slip of paper away safely. "Have you read it?"

"No. Not yet." He hesitated. "I haven't been able to bring myself to."

Fair enough. She wasn't sure she wanted to have a look either. It felt unsettlingly voyeuristic. "Thanks," she said with a nod, and headed out.

She hadn't used her journal once. That was better than she'd thought she'd manage, and a strange sort of pride welled up in her. It stayed with her the whole trip back.

“I didn’t ask half of what I meant to,” she confessed to Eira that night. “But I still feel like I got everything I wanted out of meeting him.”

“That’s good enough, I figure,” Eira said with a broad smile.

“I mean, I’m still angry at him.” He might not have been responsible in the way she’d once thought, but he had other failures to answer for. That he acknowledged and was working to make up for them helped, but didn’t mean she was obliged to forgive him. Not to her mind.

“Also good enough. Totally normal, I’d reckon.” Eira’s smile showed no signs of diminishing.

“You’re creeping me out,” Len told her.

Eira laughed. “Happy is a good look on you.”

“For however long it lasts?”

“Eh, nothing lasts forever. Enjoy it while you have it,” Eira advised.

That sounded like an excellent suggestion, and Len determined to follow it as far as she could. Things did seem to be looking up, after all, and she deserved this bit of peace.

Naturally, that meant that she was kidnapped the very next day.

Interlude IV

Personal Research Log

Day 1: 1938h

Specimen has regained consciousness. Some indication of pain and disorientation, as expected. Remote monitoring vitals to ensure no complications from anaesthetisation.

Day 2: 0913h

Specimen appears fully awake and cognizant. Exploring habitat. Indications of some degree of distress (pacing, striking walls). Considering administering low dose of sedative in order to calm it down. Experiment cannot proceed if it does not cooperate. Will add to daily IV and monitor response.

1504h

Dosage too high; will reduce on next IV.

High possibility that experiment will not be feasible. Specimen likely to remain uncooperative even with chemical assistance. Under such circumstances, I am reconsidering the path I wish to take. Ran a cost-benefit analysis to convince myself; sadly, did not get the results I hoped for. Finishing the experiment is the best course forward. Doing so will require me to abstain from contact indefinitely – at least until I can ascertain the specimen's usefulness.

I find I am unwilling to wait without so much as an end date in sight. Age catching up to me, I should say. No matter. Let us be honest. The experimental data is not the point. I have plenty from my previous specimens. A pity some few of them managed to leave the city before I could investigate them further, but those that remained have provided plentiful data. My false accounts are steadily fattening on milk provided by the same Institute that fired me. Beautiful, beautiful.

This experiment is therefore unnecessary, yes. I shall give it a day or two more. Let us see how it responds. There is something curiously amusing about watching a live specimen try to understand its surroundings. What a pitiful creature it is.

Day 3: 1350h

Administered daily IV. Vitals within normal range; specimen remains in good health. In itself odd. Projected weight loss of 5kg not matched by current weight loss

of 1.3 kg. Subject has previously demonstrated ability to gain energy from atomisation of targeted material. Breaking molecular bonds = energy release = cell renewal.

Possibility of Resonance acting to preserve subject in lieu of physical sustenance – investigate sources + is it acting independently or under conscious direction?

Subject appears to be suffering mood swings. Anger – depression – determination? Only facial expressions to go by; significant margin of error.

I shall have to wait an extra day or two, I think. I cannot help but wonder how long this phenomenon will continue. The burden of a scientist's brain. The lengths we will go to, the pleasures we will forego, in order to answer a question. In order to better mankind. It is truly disconcerting to know that so few people have the proper appreciation for the work we do. Happy enough to take the results, and yet they'll go on and on about the methods.

I take all the necessary precautions, but sometimes live testing is simply necessary. But people will get up in arms about lab animals. They're bred for us to use, we give them good lives in the interim, and yet putting them to the use they were made for is a crime. Would it be better if we experimented on humans directly?

Little reason to wax philosophical, alas.

My son is fortunately glad to provide assistance. Not quite the mind for a scientist, but he does have the temperament not to balk at what's necessary. A few more days of observation, and then I shall have my boy accompany me down for an inspection of the specimen.

Day 4: 1412h

Specimen appears to have gone off the provided water. Dear me, it does appear a little intelligent at that. Question: will this speed up the failure of Resonance to keep up with bodily needs? Every time I want to step in, something comes up to stay me. But this is too good to pass up on.

1906h

No water drunk today. Retiring for the night.

Day 5: 0850h

Reviewed overnight surveillance – no water drunk. However, specimen seems to be suffering the effects of dehydration. General speed of movement reduced approx. 30% from Day 2 of experiment.

1600h

That bitch worked out that using her Resonance would let her bypass the drugs. No reason to drag this out any longer.

Chapter 14

The room was seven steps by twelve steps. The door was set on the right of one of the shorter walls. In the opposite corner was a tap that rested at the height of her waist, and a tiny drain directly beneath it. There were vents at the very top of the room, but they were too far to reach. The white lights at the top of the room always stayed on, casting an inescapable, harsh glow around the room. The room was otherwise bare, its walls, floor, and ceiling made of a light grey material. The door was brown, but had the same texture as the walls did.

Everything thrummed with anti-Resonance.

She hadn't known it was possible to imbue an entire room with anti-Resonance in this way. She'd only ever seen it used in small ways – her bodysuits, her cutlery, her gloves.

Her father had invented anti-Resonance, and when she had woken to find herself in this room, she had at once wondered if she'd been mistaken yet again about him. But she didn't think she was. She didn't want to believe she was. Her father might have devised the technique and the machine, but it was also technically available for others to use.

For it to have been used on every scrap of material that made up this room, though... surely someone must have noticed.

She clung to that hope.

How long had she been here? The lights never changed, and there was no indication of anything beyond this room. She had no way to keep track of time. Her stomach had rumbled ferociously some time ago before giving up with a gurgle. The cycle had repeated a few times, her stomach's protests gradually fading in intensity, until it stopped altogether. Now, she felt nothing, and wondered with morbid curiosity what her body was doing. Go through the fat reserves first. And when would it begin to cannibalise itself?

Would she still be here then?

She had even begun to wish that she had something she could use her Resonance on for sustenance, though she had always disliked that aspect of her ability. Absorbing energy through the breakdown of materials kept her going without

food or water – but that same lack always made her feel less than human. This slow starvation was making her change her mind, though. She had already utilised her Resonance internally to ensure that she wouldn't have to defecate in a corner of the room. She would spare herself that indignity; she had no doubt that whoever had taken her had intended for her to be humiliated by sitting in her own filth, and she wasn't about to give them that satisfaction.

Water did pour out of the tap, but after the first few times that she'd fallen asleep immediately after drinking it, she'd worked out that it was drugged. She hadn't drunk a single drop since. She didn't know if using her Resonance on the water instead of drinking it directly would still drug her, and she couldn't risk leaving herself exposed to the dubious mercies of her kidnapper. And yet. She wasn't so inhuman that she could survive on nothing. If this went on for too long, she'd have no choice but to take that chance.

Seven steps. Twelve. Seven. Twelve.

She paced around the room, restless and afraid.

In some ways, it was like she had come back to the beginning.

Back to that encompassing fear that had been her whole world after she had arrived at the Waystation. Back to the feeling of waiting for something to happen, for the proverbial shoe to drop, for the imminent "something bad" to arrive. Never anything she could put a finger on. What she'd been through might have ended, but for a long time after, she had still been waiting for it to pick up again.

It had taken years to be rid of that pervasive feeling, and now it was back like it had never gone. Like it had always been lurking in the back of her mind, ready to rush out at the first opportunity.

Helplessness wasn't a new feeling, either. She forced it aside and continued pacing around the room, running her bare hand across the walls as she went. Her gloves were tucked into her pocket. Her Resonance pressed out of her skin, met its exact counter, and diffused uselessly.

There seemed to be no weak spots anywhere that she could take advantage of.

She had the beginnings of a plan she was working on. She knew from experience that she could dissolve different materials at different rates. When she had first begun practising on rocks out in the desert, the various minerals in that rock had broken apart unevenly. Her gimmick of wiping her hand over rock in order to smooth it out was only made possible by simultaneously using her Resonance at different strengths on each mineral.

It had been a cute little trick back at the Waystation. Now, she wondered if she could build on it to separate out the drug molecules from the water molecules. Dissolving the drugged water didn't cause her to fall unconscious; she'd determined that much once the exhaustion had grown to be too much to ignore. If she could work out a way to dissolve just the drugs while drinking the water, she could fake unconsciousness and then – well, the rest of the plan was hazy. Wait until the door was open, and scramble for it when her captor was distracted? But she knew nothing about how many people were involved or where she was and how to escape, and she'd do herself no favours if she ran right into someone else's hands.

Trying to work out those details did at least give her something else to focus on.

Time enough to fall apart once she was safe, she told herself. Seven steps. Twelve. This really was like the Waystation. She had locked herself in her room and refused to come out at all for the first week or so she'd been there. She'd dissolved anything the previous occupant had left behind for energy, and used her Resonance to clear her bowels and bladder so she didn't have to emerge for the bathroom. It was the exact same situation that she found herself in now.

Except that this wasn't something she had chosen. It was something she was being forced into. For all the negativity she'd wallowed in at the Waystation, it had also been a place of healing for her. This cell, though, could be nothing other than a prison. She swallowed her fear and simmering anger and turned her mind back to figuring out a way to get out.

There was a clicking sound from the door. She spun on her heel, torn between the desire to rush out as soon as it opened and the knowledge that she wouldn't be allowed to. The door swung inwards, revealing a tall, bulky man who took up most of

the available room. She backed up a few steps. There was no way she'd be able to get past him.

He stepped inside, eyes fixed on her. Another man came in around him, and she tried not to freeze. It was the same person she'd run into at the museum. The one who had terrified her so. And now, without the large, obscuring sunglasses he'd worn then, she realised who he was despite having never seen him in over a decade.

"Good morning, Sridevi," he said with a smile. His cat's eyes glowed near-golden in the cold light. "You remember me? Your Uncle Raj?"

Chapter 15

“It was such a pity our time together was interrupted, don’t you think? We could have done some wonderful work together if we had been given the chance.

“You were always so eager to please. Such a lovely child. You’d have stayed and helped, wouldn’t you, if you’d only been given the choice. I know you would. That’s why I brought you here, you see. I know you’ve been too scared to go against them – your father’s a nightmare, isn’t he? But I want you to know you’re safe here. You can help me now. I’ve got some experiments I’d like you to consider.

“Oh, you don’t have to decide right away. You must have other things going on in your life now? Nothing quite so important, of course, but by all means, take some time to think it over.

“Dear me, I forgot to introduce you. This is my son, Mahesh. Do you know, I once thought how nice it would be if the two of you got married. I think you’d suit each other. Do you want to get to know him now? Come now, you don’t have to be so shy. He’s been looking forward to meeting you. Watching from afar is never the same, you know. Shall I leave you two alone? You don’t need an old man interfering while you get to know each other. Or perhaps you don’t mind me staying. Always room for a chaperone, hm?

“Now, they’re quite simple experiments, really. To begin with, I would like to repeat some of the baseline work that we did together all those years ago. I want to see if anything has changed. You understand. Easy enough. I shall bring down a few samples for you to work with.

“You were always such a hard worker. It was so hard to find anyone who lived up to you afterwards. I did try, of course. But none of them were willing to put in the same level of effort you did. Such a pity. There was one – what was her name, hm. Celeste, I think? Something star-like, yes. She dug in her heels all the time and in the end I simply couldn’t work with her any longer. I had to let her go.

“Of course, it’s not that I wanted to. I think we could have done so much more together. But what can you do when there’s no cooperation? It’s a sad thing. If people hadn’t misunderstood us all those years ago, she might have been happier about working with me. As it stood, she was always suspicious.

“I used to be afraid that she’d take my data to someone else, you know? She would threaten to do so whenever she was unhappy with me. No matter what I did, it was never enough to keep her happy. Like having a mistress, really! You give more and more until you have nothing left to give, and then she leaves anyway. After all I did for her. She was quite selfish, don’t you think?”

“I know that you won’t be like that, my dear Sridevi. Don’t you worry. I haven’t tarred you with the same brush. You’re certainly not so selfish. You’ve grown up into a lovely young lady, haven’t you?”

“Yes, yes, quite a lovely young lady.”

“Now, where was I? We begin with a repetition of what we did before. After that, there are those experiments we didn’t manage to finish before we were interrupted. I’m looking into procuring another specimen for you to try your abilities on, but that may take some time. Have to find the right sort. You’ll understand. Something that won’t be missed, yes? A little – well, you’ll forgive me for saying this. A little like you.”

“You’ve been getting on somewhat with your roommates at the Lodge, but I don’t imagine you’ve formed any close friendships. You never did at the Waystation, after all. You needn’t look so surprised, my dear. I had a look at your father’s letters. Did you know that Sanju wrote him quite regularly about you? Nasty of her, in my opinion. Of both of them. I’d never have betrayed your privacy in such a manner. But it’s in the past now, so what can we do? At least you’re safe from them now.”

“In any case, I snuck a look at those letters so you’ll be pleased to know I’m quite up to date on how you’ve been. No substitute for really getting to know each other in person, of course. Yes, yes... but all the same, helpful. You can see that. I knew it was safe to bring you back because of them. I quite doubt that anyone will be looking for you just yet.”

“Perhaps I should keep an ear to the ground nonetheless? Hm. Something to consider. Rather a waste of resources, I should think. Poor Sridevi. You’ve been all but forgotten by everyone, haven’t you? But I haven’t. You see, you’re important to me. I have only ever had your best interests at heart. And I shall never forget you, my dear girl. You’ll stay right by my side.”

“Here we are. I’ll need a sample of your blood. Do needles scare you? Unsurprising. A lot of people are nervous about them. Here, Mahesh can help you – hold her arm, son. Keep her still. You have to stop moving, Sridevi. Are you that scared? Mahesh, hold her down. There we go. Close your eyes if you’re scared, dear girl. It will be over in just a minute. A small pain. Not too bad, no? And think of all that this small sacrifice will give us. There, we’re done. That’s all for now. You do look comfortable in Mahesh’s arms, don’t you? Well, I did say you’d make a good match.

“Let’s tuck this blood away nice and safe, hm? If my previous research was accurate, your blood will contain a most interesting protein marker. I’m looking forward to seeing how it interacts with the various tests I’ve devised in the past decade.

“We’ll talk again later, my dear, and I’ll fill you in on the new experiments I’ve come up with. The others weren’t overly fond of them – that Celeste was the worst of them – but you’ll help me out, won’t you? Of course you will. I’ve managed to finesse them now, so it will hardly hurt at all when we enter the next testing phase.

“But I find I can hardly contain myself! I’ll go get started on this blood sample right now. I’ll see you when I’m done with my tests. Do rest up, Sridevi. You’ll want your strength for when we begin our experiments.

“Come along, Mahesh. Let go of her. And oh yes, don’t forget, Sridevi. If there’s anything you need, Mahesh will be looking out for you.

“Sweet dreams, Sridevi.”

Chapter 16

She didn't speak to him.

It wasn't the defiant assertion of her rights that she had once claimed it to be. In front of him, it was simple fear. A paralysis of the tongue. She didn't know what to say, and so she fell back on silence, as she had when she was a child. She had been a happy little chatterbox around him at the beginning, but as he'd asked more and more of her, she'd spoken less and less.

Because when he always ended up talking her round into doing what he wanted, what point was there in saying no?

And now, she still fell silent when faced with him. Fury filled her all of a sudden. It was so easy to fall into that pattern, but she couldn't just let him have his way this time. She wasn't a scared child any longer. She'd grown and changed. He might have blindsided her with his appearance, but now that she was prepared for it, she'd fight back.

The hulking Mahesh came to mind at once, and her fervour slowed to a simmer. When he had first walked into the room, she had thought of Manny. They had the same general physique. But the impression of similarity had vanished a second later when she met his eyes. Manny had never been so intimidating, even on those rare occasions he lost his temper. She had never been afraid of him.

This man hadn't said or done a thing, and she was already terrified.

Though he'd been quiet throughout the encounter, his leering had spoken volumes. His gaze alone had been chilling in its hunger and impatience; when he had been given permission to touch her, she'd gone racing right past fear into horror. The worst of it was how unafraid and confident he was. He had no concerns about her Resonance or any other form of resistance she might bring to bear.

His hands on her had been a promise she had no desire to see fulfilled.

She needed to fight back, but so long as this man was willing to step in to subdue her, how could she? She paced around the room in a slow circle, trying to spot the camera that must be there somewhere. Once again, she came up with nothing. She couldn't figure out how they were keeping track of her. She didn't even know

how they'd grabbed her in the first place, or where she was. And yet she thought she could get away?

The bleak resignation creeping up on her was familiar, but recognising it didn't make it any easier to banish. She cast about frantically for something to hold on to – and unexpectedly, found it in his words.

No one to notice her disappearance, he'd said. No friends, he'd said.

But she had Eira. There was at least one person who'd miss her and raise the alarm. In fact, she must have already done so, given how long Len had been here already. Eira wasn't one to back down in the face of disbelief or apathy. There would be people looking for Len. All she had to do was hold out until then.

And decide what form "holding out" should take. She could go along with whatever he wanted in the hopes of staying unharmed while waiting for rescue... but something in her balked at the thought. It wasn't even the fear of being put back into his laboratory. She had nothing concrete to point at, but she had the strong suspicion that the experiments he talked about were a front. He wasn't really interested in them.

What he wanted was to hurt her. No matter what he said, this wasn't about science; this was about revenge for his fall from grace.

Waiting would mean letting him do that. And she couldn't. She couldn't.

She still didn't have a plan, but she knew she couldn't afford to let things play out. She pulled her gloves off and tucked them into the pocket of her jacket. They could stay off permanently. The only resource she had was her Resonance, so she would have to work with it. She was coming to terms with what she could do. She'd be okay.

The walls pushed back at her Resonance. She turned on the tap and dipped her fingers into the stream, letting the water break apart on her hand until she felt more energetic. Then she cupped her hands and gathered a handful of water before sitting back and closing her eyes.

It was just water. Nothing strange about it. She thought, all of a sudden, of a pair of hands pouring water into her palms. Crisp and fresh. She blinked heat away from her eyes and focused on the water. When she'd worked on rocks, it had been easier because she could let the rough textures guide her. But this was water.

You have to trust it, Adila advised.

She reached out with her Resonance. The water vanished all at once, and she felt her skin buzz with energy. She grimaced and shook her hands out. If she could absorb the energy, she should be able to choose when she didn't want to absorb it either. She filled her palms with more water and tried once more.

The water broke apart, and this time the influx of energy was too much to ignore. She turned off the tap, got up, and began circling the cell once more. She had to face it – that was what this room was. As long as she escaped it before it became a laboratory, she'd be fine. It already felt halfway like it was a lab. She blamed the lights. Always on, always bright. They were infuriating. It was hard enough to sleep when she felt so on edge, but the lights made it next to impossible.

She had initially thought that it would be worse to be in darkness. It still might. She was used to having her sight, and to have it taken away without warning would no doubt leave her floundering. And it was easier to imagine dangers around you when you couldn't see anything. She had a vivid enough imagination as it was. She didn't need to be worrying about whether there was anyone in the room with her.

But none of that made the glare any easier to handle. She sped up, circling the room another five times before huffing and dropping back to the ground in front of the tap.

Another handful of water.

The problem was that she'd never done this before. She didn't know where to begin with finding individual molecules to break down. It had always been instinctive.

Eira's water would have been pure. Untainted. Len tried to remember the feel of it, tried to find it in her handful of water.

The water dissolved. Energy flickered over her skin and died away, the air around her warming briefly. She caught another handful and tried again. And again. She didn't know if anything she was doing would help. She still didn't have a plan beyond trying to dissolve the drugs away. She was being watched. They might work out what she was trying and cut it off at the pass. Stars, they might stop her water supply. But this would at least let her get used to working with her Resonance –

instead of always shoving it aside and only begrudgingly admitting to its existence – and then maybe she'd be able to figure something else out.

It was quite a while before she realised that she wasn't absorbing the useless energy any longer. Trust your Resonance, Adila reminded her. Something like hope unfurled in her, and she reached out to try again.

She didn't know how many days had passed. She had slept a few times, if poorly. No one had come down to her since that first visit.

At least her work was bearing fruit, even if the form of that fruit was hard to discern. She was beginning to sense differences in the water, and suspected that she was feeling out the different molecules present in it. Thus far she had managed to isolate one type and act solely on it, but the lack of visible change had proven it wasn't a water molecule she'd found. The minor success was heartening, though.

She ran her hands through the stream of water, destroying that one molecule as it ran through her fingers. Was it the drug she was acting on? There was no way to tell. Normal water had nutrients added to it in the water converter itself, so she may have found one of those instead. The safest course of action was to find the water molecule and then set her Resonance on everything else.

Len frowned. That seemed... there was something she should be paying attention to in that, but she couldn't figure it out.

She folded her hands together, noting how the bones of her wrists jutted out far more than they'd used to. It was something she'd realised – well, some time ago, not that she could keep track of time in here. One sleep ago. She might as well use her brief naps as a marker. Despite her Resonance filling her with energy, she was still losing weight. What she was doing wasn't a perfect replacement for actual food.

It was dangerous, because it meant that if things dragged on too long, she was likely to become too weak to fight back. But at the same time, a part of her was happy because it felt like she was that little bit closer to human. No matter what anyone said. No matter what she thought in her darkest moments.

Five more sleeps, and she isolated another molecule. It still wasn't water.

She trailed her hand along the walls as she walked. She needed to find the water molecule and then work on everything else. That thought still bothered her and she still didn't know why, but she thought it might be something to do with the conventional understanding of how Resonance worked.

It was, to use the same poor analogy that non-Resonants tried to understand them through, a means of tapping into particular frequencies in order to either read or act on them. Maraoma's weather seer could read pressure systems and had enough meteorological knowledge to be able to use it to predict the weather. Manny could read deviances in the normal order of things. Eira and Len could both reach for their respective frequencies and act on them, wringing water out of air, splitting water into its individual atoms. Splitting anything down.

That was why her father had been fascinated, wasn't it? Because she could act on so many different things. Didn't that mean she was acting across multiple frequencies as well? She scowled at the floor. And that thought was also somehow connected to the other one. Finding molecules, reversing what she was acting on, working on multiple unconnected frequencies.

She lost the thread and didn't bother grasping after it. Now, how did anti-Resonance work? She'd read about it in her long hours at the library, but she couldn't remember all the details. The simplified answer was that it precisely matched the frequencies that the Resonant reached out to, and then mirrored it so as to produce a field that cancelled the Resonance. Easy enough. The hardest part had been impregnating molecules with that frequency, so that the anti-Resonance field became self-sustaining.

Come to think of it – if someone had managed to reverse-engineer that latter part, it would have been easy to construct their own machine. And patent infringement was hardly going to stop someone who'd stoop to kidnapping. Which, together with that man's snide comments, meant that her father wasn't involved with this. She didn't realise that she'd been so tense about the possibility until that weight vanished.

And in the wake of relief, clarity followed.

Chapter 17

Trust your Resonance, Adila said. Trust yourself.

It looked like all this while, a part of her had been doing just that. She'd been told that her Resonance wouldn't act on her treated belongings; she had *believed* it, and so she had never been able to reach through the anti-Resonance field. Her Resonance reached out, found what it wanted to act on, and changed to match it – the anti-Resonance was meant to block her Resonance at the first part of that equation.

But anti-Resonance was just another type of frequency.

There was no reason she couldn't match it too.

Len stretched, enjoying the creaking pops of her joints for the first time. Her muscles ached and she sorely missed having an actual bed to sleep on – not to mention lights she could turn off. But there was something of an end in sight now. She knew what she had to do. Of more significance, she knew she could do it. A little more practise, and she'd be getting out of here.

Seven more sleeps. She thought she'd gotten the hang of differentiating between molecules. Through that, she'd also started learning to identify which frequencies those molecules moved at.

Six more sleeps and she knew she'd worked out how to identify frequencies. Anti-Resonance was a slippery thing, though. Since her Resonance was cancelled by it, she found it hard to hold on long enough to study it.

She pressed her hand against the wall, and once again felt her Resonance die away before she could get a read on the anti-Resonance.

There had to be a way around this. She wandered over to the other side of the room and turned on the tap to splash her face with water. Then she shook her head suddenly, her hair catching on the water and sending droplets flying.

She'd been wondering about it from the start! It was ridiculous to think that it had taken her this long to figure it out.

All she had to do was figure out her own frequency, and then invert it.

This up and down tottering through frustrated dismay and exhilarated realisation was quite tiring. Len rubbed her eyes and set to work again.

The door clicked open without warning. Len scooted backwards and scrambled to her feet as Mahesh came into the room.

“You’ll be glad to know the experiment’s over,” he said. His voice was mild and light and genial, quite unlike anything Len had expected from him. “Dad’s wrapping things up so I’m helping him clean up.”

Len was positive that he wasn’t referring to the sort of cleaning up she was used to. He took a step forward; she took a step back. An amused smile spread across his face as he moved a little closer.

Len threw all caution to the wind and darted past him, flinging herself out the open door and down the corridor it revealed. Behind her, a soft, amused chuckle echoed.

It was a short corridor, and stopped at an apparent dead end. She whirled in a panic. There had been nothing else in the other direction; she’d seen that much. The door to her cell had been at the end of the corridor. There had to be an exit hidden somewhere, but Mahesh was sauntering down the corridor towards her with his hands in his pockets and an unconcerned look on his face.

Len slammed her hand against the wall. Anti-Resonance to match her again. Mahesh smiled again, so smug and secure in his knowledge of her helplessness, and a cold fury seized her.

Help me, she thought. I need help, please.

She reached out, felt her Resonance twist, slide in sideways, and wrench; felt something bend, and break, and shatter.

Everything crumbled.

Chapter 18

“Stars! Where did you come from?”

“Oh, around,” Len said vaguely. “Where am I?”

“Outside the shields,” the woman said, taking Len’s arm as she peered at her face. “Hang on, you’re that Waystation lady with the ancient papers.”

Len blinked, belatedly recognising the woman as the one who’d checked her in when she’d first arrived at Maraoma. “That’s me. Do you have some water?”

She was chivvied inside the shields in short order, pushed into a chair, given a glass of water and ordered to drink it all down while a doctor was summoned. Len drank obediently, then returned the glass and said, “I was kidnapped. You should probably contact the relevant people. And I’d like to talk to my friend Eira. And my father.”

The woman’s colleague gaped at her.

“And then I would like some food, please,” Len added. “I’ll pay you afterwards, if you’d be willing to spot me a meal now.”

“I’ll get that,” the woman said faintly, and hurried away to a workstation. A flurry of phone calls ensued, following which the woman disappeared for a time, then reappeared with a box of takeaway food.

Len devoured it in minutes, enjoying the sharp bite of chilli on her tongue. “I do wish I could turn off the sun,” she said wistfully. “I was hoping I could have escaped at night so it would be dark.”

“Um,” the woman said.

The police had rather a lot of questions. Eira and Len’s father showed up together, which was a surprise, and immediately began arguing about how Len needed a shower and food and rest before being questioned, which was less of a surprise.

“There’s not much to say,” Len interrupted, when it looked like her father was about to explode at a particularly insistent policeman. “When I was little, Un – Raj studied my Resonance in unethical experiments that eventually got him barred from the Institute. It seems he blamed me for that, and decided to get revenge when he

realised I was back here. He kidnapped me and held me in a cell with the assistance of his son Mahesh. He also implied that he had illegally imprisoned and experimented on others before me. It took me some time to work out an escape route, but I eventually did. Upon escaping, I discovered that his little hideaway was outside the shields and buried underground, which explains why no one ever found it. I walked around the shields until I found an entryway, and then I knocked, and these people brought me in and called you.”

“And how did you escape?” the policeman asked, before anyone could say anything else.

“Mahesh implied that his father had ordered him to kill me,” Len answered. Eira sucked in a sharp breath. “So I dropped the building on him.” Eira’s inhalation turned into a choking cough. “I think you should probably go see if he survived it or not.”

Only dust had fallen around her, but she’d seen thick slabs of rubble crush Mahesh before he was completely buried, so she didn’t hold out much hope for that. She couldn’t find it in herself to feel guilty, though. Maybe later it would hit her – but for now, all she felt was relief and satisfaction.

“Quite,” her father interjected. “Why don’t you inspect the premises instead of pressing the victim needlessly?”

“I came from thereabouts,” Len added helpfully, waving in the general direction of the place she’d left behind her.

“We need to ascertain if,” one of the policemen began.

“You need to check if the people responsible for this atrocity are still there or not, and if so, you need to take them into custody,” her father said.

Len watched as he harried them into stepping away from her, and eventually out of the shields altogether. Eira slipped into the seat next to her, and Len reached out to take her hand.

“I really want a shower,” Len sighed.

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Eira giggled, and squeezed her hand. Her grip was clammy and cold, but Len didn’t let go. “Stars, I’ve been so scared for you. Your dad’s been up in everyone’s business trying to find out where you were.”

“You’ll have to tell me everything... later. After I’ve slept.”

"I will." Eira hesitated. "You don't seem so mad at your dad?"

"He wasn't responsible," Len said. "I've decided to believe that. He let me down, but he didn't do it and he's trying to make for it now. I can work with that."

They sat in silence for a bit.

"Manny got here last week," Eira said eventually. "He was all sorts of upset that he couldn't use his Resonance to find you. He said you were the one who worked out he could sense it when people were using their Resonance, but he couldn't even use it in any way that was helpful to you, so what use was it."

"Things don't have to be useful to be worth existing," Len murmured. She looked down at their linked hands. "There's more worth to us than what we can do for others." She shook her head and stood up, pulling Eira with her. "Come on. I want that shower, and then I'm going to sleep. If those policemen still want to talk to me, they'll have to wait till after. Let's go home."

Interlude V

My dear daughter,

It is so strange to sit here and write this, knowing that I will be dead when you read it. I wonder if everyone feels the same way when they do things like this. It was a suggestion made by the lawyer who drew up my will, who said that it can often be helpful for loved ones to receive such a letter following a death. Some form of absolution. Giving or asking for forgiveness. I hope that you will not be too angry with me for leaving you. It will never have been intentional, but I suppose that will be of little comfort.

Strangely, it is harder to write this than it was to write my letter to your father. I wonder why that is, since I have been writing letters to you ever since you left. There is something so final about this one that I found myself agonising over every word, trying to determine if it said exactly what I wanted it to or whether there was any chance for misinterpretation. In the end, I wrote and discarded so many drafts that I have come to realise: there is no way I can write the perfect letter. There will always be a risk. That you will misunderstand me, or worse, that you will understand me but disapprove nonetheless. It is a chance I must take. So I preface this draft with this note, in order to tell you that Amma loves you now and always. If nothing else, remember that about me.

I suppose a letter like this necessitates my talking about the big things. The important things that I want to ensure you know. I've already gotten the most important down, so let me talk a little about the RAIE now. I talked your father into setting it up because I was convinced that public perception had to change before anything significant could be done. Your father thought in terms of changing the law first, then public perception; I thought of working in the opposite direction, or at least simultaneously. Because the laws are made by people, you see, and so I thought that we had to ensure they understood Resonance so that they wouldn't be biased in their law-making. Otherwise it would simply be a legalisation of biases. I felt vindicated in my belief given that so many of our proposed laws and amendments had failed to get through. Your father was still more hopeful than I was, but even he grew to look a

little fondly on my personal mantra: "Teach them. If they refuse to learn, burn it all to the ground."

It had to be a little sanitised for the RAIE – it's "Promoting acceptance through learning" but now you know what the original was! Your father insisted that I be in charge of the RAIE as he felt that a non-Resonant would be better received by the public. Ironic, given that the RAIE is about trying to give a voice to Resonants, but sadly accurate. I have tried to live up to his belief that I can provide a fair voice nonetheless, and I do my best to always take my cue from him and other Resonants.

The RAIE is so very important to me because it has always seemed to me a way to get you back. After so long without contact from you, I am less convinced of that now. But I still think that this is the best way I can prove my love for you while we are so far apart. At its heart, the RAIE is about creating a safe environment for you to come back to if you wish. It's about ensuring that what happened to you can't happen to anyone else.

It will take time to get that far. We may not even be able to achieve it within your lifetime, let alone mine. But I believe the attempt itself is a worthwhile goal.

When I become frustrated with how long everything takes, your father reminds me that once upon a time, he used to be biased against people who bartered – it was something for layabouts who couldn't be bothered getting a proper job to earn money and buy things with. It was so much a part of him that he didn't think to question it until he saw his brother, whom he had a high opinion of, bartering for furniture. It was something he had unconsciously picked up, and it was something that he managed to consciously unlearn. That is what he reminds me of, and what you may want to keep in mind as well: that it takes time to unlearn "truths," even when we have found them to be lies, and that the process is ongoing and lifelong.

Is this enough to be going on? I don't know how else to tell you how I feel. There are all the usual sorts of things I feel I should be telling you: that I want you to grow up kind and gentle, that kindness and gentleness doesn't mean letting others run roughshod over you, that I want you to find someone who will cherish you the way you deserve, that I want you to be able to share that emotion with that person. But that all seems self-evident, doesn't it? It's so generic I hesitate to include it at all, even if it's also true. But there you go – it's been included anyway.

If I have a non-generic hope, it's that you'll come back to Maraoma and be able to read this. That you'll visit your father and be able to foster a relationship with him. It's been so long and you've grown up without us, so that relationship may not be what it used to be. But I hope that you can at least find some form of friendship with him.

As a wife, it saddens me to see how badly he took what happened. As a mother, all I have is sadness and anger at having failed you. But please believe me, my darling daughter, that we are doing our very best to make up for things. You may remember that you were closer to me as a child than you were to him. Here's what you don't know: that when you were born, he took six months off work because he couldn't bear to be away from you. That sometimes he would carry you and look at you like you were the most perfect, amazing being in the world.

And of course, you are. To us, you are and always will be. That's a parent's prerogative to believe. But I want you to remember that too, and to believe in yourself and your worth. Don't let anyone ever bring you down.

All my love,

Amma

Epilogue

In her mother's Memorial Box, Len found a cache of documents. Some of it was unsubstantiated, but others were backed up with a trail of data. All of it was damning. Her mother had discovered Raj's older experiments on Resonants, including some of Eira's mother's friends, and had managed to get proof of what he'd done.

She had died before she could make that proof public, which seemed too much a coincidence. They couldn't prove it, but Len had no doubt that Raj and Mahesh had somehow been involved. Why else would her mother run out into traffic like that without even looking? Even on the security camera, it was easy to see that she was scared and running from something rather than simply failing to pay attention.

The public outcry over the papers her father – no, an anonymous source – had released was incredible. It was also superficial. They cared in the same way the city cared about those who lived in Lodges. Enough for the appearance of benevolence, not enough to disguise the ruthless pragmatism. A city could not afford to lose any citizen to starvation.

But the people at the RAIE were quite talented at stoking public fervour in the right ways and at the right times. They were forcing the government to take action for fear of losing that aura of humanity. She was, of course, being unfair. There were those, both in the general public and in the government, who were genuine in their outrage and who were pushing hard in two areas: punishment for the culprits, and laws to ensure nothing similar could occur again.

That was good.

She had to undergo a medical check to determine what they'd done to her. Besides a mild case of malnutrition, she was deemed healthy, and allowed to return to the Lodge with Eira. Manny was staying one Lodge over, since theirs was at full capacity. Len went right back to her old routine, much to the bewilderment of Manny and the frustration of Eira, who seemed unhappy whenever Len was out of her sight.

"I came back and you weren't here," she said, when Len asked her about it at last. "I thought maybe you went for a walk or something so I waited but you never

came back. And you didn't for ages." Her face scrunched up like she was trying not to cry, so Len hugged her in apology. "I'm sorry. I know I'm being ridiculous."

"Let's get phones," Len said.

Eira sniffed and pulled back from the hug. "Phones?"

Len nodded. "I'll call and tell you whenever I'm going somewhere. And when I'm back here. So you'll know." It didn't solve the problem of wanting Len in view at all times, but Len remembered Eira stepping up to assist with side-walking during a storm. Eira would be able to handle it.

In time, she did. Manny helped, as solid a presence as ever and happy to support either of them if they needed it. He hadn't been able to help find her, and seemed determined to make up for it now. In the meanwhile, Len was left contemplating one last little problem.

"If you've got the anti-Resonance machine working," she asked, as she and her father sat together in the same café they'd met at before, "why are you having so much trouble with replicating Resonance?"

"The machine is simple," her father said. "Its only job is to irradiate material placed into it. But that doesn't give the material the ability to utilise that Resonance." He tapped the side of his head. "It's the way it's processed here that gives us our abilities."

She turned the mug over in her hand. At her father's recommendation, she'd bought some hot chocolate to try. It was excellent. "Throwing Resonance at something would work, but... not throwing it at people?"

"It's been attempted," her father said. "Volunteers who liked the idea. But it never did work. Something about living things." He hesitated. "That's why your ability was of such interest. To me, and to them, in different ways. You're the only person known to be able to affect organic matter. That might be the starting point needed to replicate Resonance, whether in people or computers."

"I'd recommend computers," Len advised.

"It was my inclination," her father agreed. "We want a controlled application. And a legacy. There's little point in building equipment around people whose lives are ephemeral. For that, I need to develop a computer that is suitably intelligent, then teach it to understand and use Resonance."

“It feels so much like instinct,” Len said. She thought there was something lovely about the idea of building a legacy around people instead of machines, but she supposed she understood where her father was coming from. She didn’t want to force Resonance on anyone, either. People ought to have the freedom to choose, and machines were necessary to take up the slack.

“Hence, my difficulties,” her father said with a smile. “However, I do believe I will manage it soon. I have developed a computer that is capable of limited reasoning.” He shook his head. “I had to dig into scientific records from before the Great Strike. They had already managed it then, but so little has survived that I have to recreate it piecemeal.”

“What’s made it through?” Len asked.

“Some of the coding,” her father said. “Some suggestions for approaches. Nothing about which would be the best method, of course, for that would make things too simple.”

Len took a sip of her drink in lieu of laughing at him.

“There are quite a few interesting documents that have been long buried,” her father reflected. “Deemed of little use in building the cities in the wake of the Great Strike, you see. But now that we have built a sustainable city, it might well be time to investigate those old records. Something to suggest to the historians.” His eyes gleamed. “Did you know that the asteroid neither contained nor directly caused radiation?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Of course it did. The irradiated zone has been documented.” Even if only its outer edges had been investigated, and even that not in depth. The existence of the radiation couldn’t be denied.

“Oh, no. The radiation was caused by the asteroid striking nuclear fission plants in the vicinity. They were a common source of energy back then, and enough of them went up that the area was damaged quite comprehensively.”

Len stared at her father. That was interesting. The museum hadn’t said anything about that, and one would think they’d be best placed to speak about it. “Why would that knowledge have been lost?”

“First you’d have to decide if it was an accident or deliberate,” her father said. “Knowing that the toll would have been far lower if not for what humans put on the planet...”

Len drank some of her hot chocolate, pondering that. She’d like to read those documents herself. If being trapped in a cell had done anything for her, it had at least given her the time to think. The only thing she now knew was certain was that nothing was ever wholly as it seemed. There was always another aspect to it, that might strengthen or weaken one’s connections to it. Eira, Resonating with water. Her father, no longer her childhood nightmare. Len’s Resonance, more variable and strong and controlled than she had ever dreamed. Stars, the way the radiation had formed. It was a little as a person, and as big as the world. That was the only constant.

Change was a part of who they were. She could trust that now.

After its recent upheaval settled, it would be interesting to see if Maraoma would embrace that lesson, or if it would continue to stagnate as it had been doing before. Maraoma would be shaken up and tossed around, but if it tried, it would come out of it better. Stronger.

She still didn’t want to stay here.

“When you build that machine,” Len said, “could I get a few for myself?”

Her father raised an eyebrow. “Oh? With which Resonances?”

“One – no, two for a weather seer,” Len said. It was good to have redundancies. What else did she need? Something to ease construction; that was the most important. “A few for deconstructing rock. A few if you can replicate my Resonance.”

He gave her a long look. “You’re up to something.”

“I’ll tell you before I do anything,” she offered.

He shook his head, but he was smiling. “I’ll work on those machines.”

She swallowed another mouthful of her drink. “There’s something I’ve been wondering for a while now,” she said. Her father gave her an expectant look. “The Adventures of Princess Eve?”

He put a hand over his mouth. “Oh. You found that.” The corners of his eyes were crinkling into amused lines.

“I did, yes,” she said.

He cleared his throat and put his hand down, though the traces of a laugh lingered on his lips. "Your mother thought that catching them early was important," he offered. "And that children learned best from stories."

"It's a useful medium," Len mused. "I didn't know you wrote fiction."

"When I was younger," her father began. He paused to consider his words. "I used to know a woman – a neighbour – who would tell me stories if we both had time. I don't believe I'm anywhere near as good as she was, but she taught me a little about what makes for a story you remember. I didn't think I'd put it to use, but your mother convinced me, and that was that."

She left the café feeling like she'd made a start, like anything was possible. Drunk on the possibilities that sprawled before her, she made a quick stop at the library to borrow as many books as she could. She returned to the Lodge with them, and curled up in bed with the lot.

"I have a question," Eira said.

Len glanced up from the book she was reading. Eira was standing on her ladder, peering over the top of Len's bed at the books surrounding her.

"Are you planning on going into agriculture?"

Len smiled. It was small, but it felt real. "I had a few questions of my own," she said. "Do you remember when we went on that tour to the agricultural district?"

Eira nodded.

"Our guide said that plants didn't grow in soil," Len said. "As it turns out, that's an over-simplification. It's possible to grow plants in soil, but that requires so much treatment of the soil that it's not seen as practical."

"You don't sound like you agree," Eira said, tilting her head in question.

"All I know is, those fresh plants tasted really good," Len said. There were no plants anywhere in Maraoma, outside the agricultural district and even that was hidden away under opaque glass. She'd never thought of the possibility of greenery within a city before, but the pictures of places from before the Great Strike had been illuminating. Trees next to sidewalks, parks with grass and bushes and flowers. It was an image that wouldn't leave her. "And in any case, I'm just trying to satisfy my curiosity right now."

“Curiosity about...” Eira climbed up onto the bed, sprawling beside her and scanning the titles of the books around them. “Wait, city infrastructure?”

Len closed her book. “About what minerals need to be removed from the soil for it to be healthy. About what needs to be added, and how to produce them. About how construction works here, especially when the city’s foundations need to be upgraded. Did you know they knock down a whole area at a time if they need to do work on the foundations?”

“I think that’s what they did in Tejara, too,” Eira agreed. “No real way around it. If you find a better material or method, you need to use it even if you have to get rid of a building first. At least they rebuild, right?”

Len nodded. Sometimes, things had to come down in order for something better to be built. “I don’t suppose there’s any helping it,” she agreed. “It just bothers me that there’s no attempt at doing it the other way around.”

Build a new section of foundation, build the replacement building, re-home everything and everyone that needed it, and *then* bring down the old bit. Then you could re-do the foundation there and build another replacement building, re-home everyone, knock down another building. Move on in circles. For a city built entirely on circles and sectors, it seemed to have missed the obvious. Instead, it made no provisions for those uprooted by construction, leaving them to the mercies of their families, or Lodges, or Hotels, which were the Lodges’ more up-scale cousins in Ring Four. Bring things down, and let those affected scramble to sort their lives out. Business as usual for Maraoma. But perhaps it would change. There was a chance. She would still have to remain here for a little while at least, while she built up her resources and found people to join her.

“You’re plotting something,” Eira accused.

“Not in the least,” Len said. The same accusation from her father and from Eira. How hurtful. It was like they didn’t trust her. She hid a smile behind her book. “The groundwork hasn’t even been laid yet.”

“That only means there’s something to lay the groundwork for!”

Len giggled. “I think I’d like to build a new city, Eira. Would you like to help?”

There was a beat of silence, as Eira gaped at her.

“Um,” Eira said at last.

“Groundwork first,” Len said, patting the stack of books she’d collected. She saw Eira’s eyes flit over the titles again, realisation dawning. “It’s not so bad as all that, is it? Build a Waystation, and then another one next to it, and another one next to that, and at some point you’ll have enough to call it a city. Not too complicated.”

“Except for the part where you’ve got to find a good spot in the desert and build a Waystation.”

“Well, I didn’t mean right this second,” Len said. “But I will, one day.”

“And why all of a sudden?” Eira gave her a sceptical look.

“It really isn’t,” Len said. She’d been dreaming of it for far longer than she’d dared to admit, even if it only began to seem possible when she’d arrived here. But now she knew that she wanted somewhere new she could go. She could envision it with such vivid clarity that it made her heart ache.

It would be a city built of pieces. Each building or small group of buildings would stand on its own piece of foundation, built in the floating style that all Waystations used. It was stable for small areas and allowed for easier repairs and renovations than a large, city-wide foundation did. Every area would be connected to the next with the flexible protective walkways that the Waystations used to connect the shielded area to the windmills and solar panels outside. There would be no unification, no rigidity. The buildings would move with the ebb and flow of the sands and the shields would move with them, circling a small span, always returning to their centre. There would be gardens and ponds. There would be healthy soil and timid plants breathing free. The city would be populated by those searching for themselves; those who didn’t know where to go or what to do; those who needed a place in the interim or forever.

“Are you going to plant things?” Eira asked, an odd smile tipping her lips.

“I can get rid of the harmful minerals, I think,” Len said, flexing her hands. “That only lasts as long as I’m alive, of course. But if my father really can build a machine to replicate a specific Resonance, we can do it on a larger scale. Then it’s a matter of adding the right nutrients to make the soil fertile. Bio-waste ought to do the trick. If my father can replicate your Resonance, it’s worth comparing it to water from the converters to see if there’s a difference, too. I think there might be, even if the

only benefit is in the amount of energy it takes. Either way, we can give the city what it needs to keep going as long as it wants.”

Eira dropped her gaze. She seemed to be thinking hard.

“It did seem a ridiculous idea at first,” Len admitted.

“As opposed to now?” Eira laughed.

“I think I can do it,” Len said. “I won’t be doing it alone.” She reached out and took Eira’s hand in hers. Skin was much warmer when she wasn’t feeling it through the shield of a glove. “Maraoma isn’t the place for me, but I can’t go back to a Waystation either. And I don’t want to keep going from city to city, trying to find a place where I fit. I’d rather make one for myself. And for all the people who feel like they don’t fit, either.”

“I could bring my mother over,” Eira said. “If she’s fit to travel by then.”

“You could,” Len said. “Do you know how to make anything other than water?”

Eira frowned. “No, of course not.”

“Why ‘of course?’” Len asked. “Have you tried?”

“Well, no, but.” Eira’s brows knitted together. “Do you think...?”

“I don’t know, but maybe,” Len said. Eira’s ability had to involve fusing atoms from the air, so it stood to reason that she could do so in configurations other than pure water. She had said that her mother’s Resonance similarly involved water, so it seemed likely that she had presumed she too would be limited to manipulating water. If she hadn’t attempted to create anything else, then Len thought it was too early to say she *couldn’t* create anything else. “It’s worth a try, isn’t it? If it works, that’ll be useful for the new city.” She paused, then huffed. “Of course, Maraoma still has that pesky law about Resonants not being allowed to leave.”

“Might get repealed,” Eira said, still looking somewhat stunned at the possibility Len had dropped before her. “Lots of laws about Resonants are getting torn down by everyone these days. Government can’t take too long to catch up, can they?”

“Never underestimate bureaucracy,” Len sighed.

“If it doesn’t get repealed, are you staying?” Eira asked.

“Of course not.” She was done with allowing others to determine the course of her life.

“I didn’t think so.”

“Would you like to be my mayor?” Len asked, giving Eira her best winning smile. “I’ll be ruling from the background, of course, but you can be the face of things for me.”

“Being a puppet has never been a life goal, I’m afraid,” Eira said.

Len giggled. “All right. Co-mayors. But I’ll warn you right now that all publicity affairs are yours to handle.”

Eira’s grip tightened, and she leaned over to press a kiss to Len’s bared knuckles. “All right,” she said, her voice so rich with fondness that Len had to blink away tears even as she smiled. “Let’s build a place for us.”

END

Exegesis:

Intersectional Representation and Identity Formation in *The Waystation*

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Introduction

I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books. I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to. [...] What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. - Chimamanda Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story"

When I first began to study feminism, it was under the misconception that there was no real present need for it; that sexism, like racism, was a thing of the past that only less enlightened persons still held onto, and that certainly didn't exist in modern-day societies. That was, after all, what I had grown up being told – once, there was slavery and other horrible things, but today we knew better, and there was no such thing as one race or sex being better than another. But as I grew older, and started paying attention to global news, I began to realise that all was not quite as straightforward as it had once seemed. In this supposedly post-racist, post-sexist world, it was still possible for black children in America to be killed by white police officers who would go on to be exonerated of any crime (Abbey-Lambertz; Gettys), for the Taliban to shoot a teenage girl for having the temerity to advocate for educational rights for girls (Leiby and Leiby), for a high-profile rape case to end with a mere six-month sentence, of which the rapist only served three (Rocha and Winton). And these were the big cases, the ones that through the right confluence of time and place and luck, had gained media attention. How many had gone unremarked on before, and how many more would continue to go unnoticed by the general population? Jyoti Singh was so brutally gang-raped that she died from her injuries; her

story shocked the world and led to massive calls for reform in how rape was dealt with under Indian law (“My daughter’s name was Jyoti Singh”). A year later, the Shakti Mills gang-rape case proved that little had changed even so (Barry and Choksi). Certain cases might explode in the media, but it was evident that actual change would take a lot of effort and time to instigate, and that there was much more beyond the immediately visible surface. Far from being a thing of the past, the study of race and feminism were very much necessary for engaging with the world as it stood and still stands.

But actually studying feminism was frustrating. It had its enlightening moments in the way it questioned unthinking biases and so on, which taught me to critically evaluate my own perceptions and belief systems. Still, it left me with a vague sense of discontent I couldn’t put into words. All I knew was that parts of what feminism talked about left me cold, and that it seemed in some ways to speak to a person who wasn’t me. But as a woman, I thought that it should, and I thought that the half-hearted way that some of its messages resonated was the best I could get.

It wasn’t in formal theories that I discovered the answers to why I felt this way. It was online, where I least expected to find feminist discourse, least of all while looking up game reviews. But that was where it started. I found one blog that criticised the misogyny in a particular game, and connected it to a larger pattern of misogyny in the gaming industry. That blog pointed me to other blogs that talked about similar patterns of sexism in other industries, and those pointed me to blogs that discussed how difficult it was to be a woman, and how much more difficult to be a woman of colour. Or a lesbian woman of colour, or trans, or any combination thereof. I found one feminist blog, and then another, and another, all linked in an online feminist circle that spanned the globe. It was in this online space that I first heard the phrases “white feminism” and “intersectional feminism.” These resonated in a way I had never before experienced – yes, I found myself saying as I read anecdotes and theories, yes, exactly, that’s happened to me too.

It was online that I first discovered that feminism wasn’t the all-inclusive movement it is sometimes perceived to be; that in its inception it often upheld just as many prejudices as it fought against; that this is a pattern that has been sustained to various extents today. This is most clearly seen in studying the suffragette movement

in America, when the fights for equality across races and genders ran up against each other. To begin with, “white female abolitionists had emphasized the similarities between their own oppressed status as wives and daughters under patriarchy and the debased condition of ‘the Negro’ under slavery,” thus encouraging fellow feeling and suggesting that white women ought to fight against slavery (Newman 5). However, black men were eventually given the right to vote while women as a whole remained without. “Legal recognition of black male citizenship meant that white women could no longer claim a shared political status (disenfranchisement) with black men” (Newman 5). This led to the eventual rise of racism within the suffragette movement, as white women felt that they had been unjustly cheated of something that black men did not deserve more than they did. In time, “political solidarity with black people was forgotten and they urged white men to allow racial solidarity to overshadow their plans to support black male suffrage” (hooks 3). The progress of women’s rights was measured against racial rights, instead of viewing them as collaborators against the existing power hierarchy. This, of course, resulted in black women finding themselves doubly discriminated against, with their particular experience best comprehended through that dual, intersectional perspective – not simply one or the other. bell hooks writes that

At a time in American history when black women in every area of the country might have joined together to demand social equality for women and a recognition of the impact of sexism on our social status, we were by and large silent. Our silence was not merely a reaction against white women liberationists or a gesture of solidarity with black male patriachs. It was the silence of the oppressed – that profound silence engendered by resignation and acceptance of one’s lot. (1)

Black women ended up torn between the two movements, because there was no space for intersectionality there, and consequently found their voices doubly silenced whenever they tried to speak up for themselves. White women and black men have often spoken on their behalf, but their own voices have not been heard. Today, this pattern still holds true in places, though its manifestation may be different. For instance, bell hooks points out the preponderance of works curated by white women or black men about the black woman’s experience; “it is significant that in our society

white women are given grant money to do research on black women but I can find no instance where black women have received funds to research white women's history" (10). It may be argued that "white women's history" could well be conflated with traditional "women's history," but the point remains that black women's voices are still considered lower in priority than white women's or black men's voices, especially when speaking about the black woman's experience.

Of course, even in discussions about the perils of speaking over and for women of colour, I found instances of dissonance. So much of the discourse was centred on America, and on white interactions with people of colour. If it wasn't America, it was Britain, or Australia, and it was still always about white interactions with people of colour. There seemed to be little consideration of other countries, or the ways in which racism functioned outside of this well-documented pattern. I found myself wondering about the applicability of some of these theories in countries where whiteness did not dominate, such as Singapore. Were they relevant, and if so, in what way?

Sangeetha Thanapal argues they are. Her description of "Chinese privilege" in Singapore draws from the idea of "white privilege" in many Western countries. The idea at hand is that where one group dominates, it holds privilege over other groups, and though this pattern is most often talked about in terms of white dominance, it is also applicable towards other groups in other countries. Thanapal's position is that in Singapore, privilege is held by the Chinese community, though that privilege is invisible to the members of that community. For Thanapal, white privilege and Chinese privilege function in analogous ways (boundary2). Following this line of thought, theories about the dominant group being at least in part unaware of its own power seem to hold true. It seems to be how power asserts itself. By making itself part of the everyday for the dominant group, it makes itself an indispensable part of life. Giving power to marginalised groups begins to look like an unfair advantage, because those from dominant groups see their current way of life as the baseline from which all people begin.

To return to an American-centric perspective, affirmative action is often criticised on the basis of giving people of colour opportunities based solely on race rather than ability. This is how the argument goes: if a person of colour is talented

enough, they would be able to get that position even without the interference of affirmative action; all affirmative action does is put people in positions that they are unqualified for, so that schools and companies can meet a “quota” of people of colour. This is, of course, a perspective that ignores all the barriers that stand in the way of a qualified person of colour. Historical ill treatment of a group carries modern-day consequences. In Singapore, this is most clearly seen in the position of the indigenous Malay population – which is currently facing the same debate on affirmative action thanks to a recent ruling that minorities must be given a chance as President if enough time passes without a minority President – and the same patterns can be seen in other countries in the region. It is of course possible that one population may harbour its own xenophobia against others, and indeed some degree of this is common around the world. In the local context, a colonial legacy has also left its mark on many South-East Asian countries, where old biases still exist at least on an unconscious level.

As far back as 1977, Syed Hussein Alatas argued that the colonial image of native Asian populations was deliberately shaped to portray them as being less capable than their white colonisers; they were lazy, vicious, unreliable, and so on. He writes that

In its historical empirical manifestation the colonial ideology utilized the idea of the lazy native to justify compulsion and unjust practices in the mobilization of labour in the colonies. It portrayed a negative image of the natives and their society to justify and rationalize European conquest and domination of the area. It distorted elements of social and human reality to ensure a comfortable construction of the ideology. (2)

It was necessary to reduce the native population to this caricature in order to maintain their self-image as being overseers and educators who were offering a better way of life, and to gloss over the exploitation of native peoples and lands that took place. This image was perpetuated throughout all reaches of society, “from vulgar fantasy and untruth to refined scholarship” (Alatas 8). But one colours the other, and supposedly objective scholarship is inevitably coloured by the unconsciously-held prejudices of the writer. Of course, the perpetuated stereotype

has changed over time as various countries in the region fought for independence; while there remain “writings critical of the economic or political situations... direct denigration of the natives, their society and history” have by and large vanished. “The image of the indolent, dull, backward and treacherous native,” Alatas writes, “has changed into that of a dependent native requiring assistance to climb the ladder of progress” (8). The negativity is no longer blatant, but now comes in the guise of a paternalistic desire to guide and help. The stereotype of the lazy native that needs to be shown the right path is the stereotype that has persisted even to the present day, and it has coloured not only white colonialists’ perceptions, but also the perceptions of other ethnic groups which entered the country during the period of colonialisation. Alatas’ *The Myth of the Lazy Native* is in large part focused on correcting this stereotype, since it has present-day implications for racial interactions.

Alatas writes that

For Malaysia, this is not merely an exercise in historical scholarship: there is a pressing need to correct the colonial image of the Malays for this image still exerts a strong influence amongst an influential section of non-Malays, and it has also influenced a section of the Malay intelligentsia. The persistence of this image will impair the effort towards national integration. It has led to certain discriminatory practices in the employment of Malays – a number of employers have avoided Malays because they believe them to be lazy. Many people thought that by nature Malays are not endowed with the capacity to do business. All these ideas derive their origin from the colonial image of the Malays. (16-17)

This is true not only of Malaysia, but also of Singapore, where the majority population is made up of Chinese people who immigrated here during the era of colonialisation. The image of the Chinese person was equally rife with racism, but the colonial perspective elevated the Chinese person over the native Malays in certain respects, largely to do with economic knowledge. Alatas quotes American historian Clive Day, who wrote that “[t]he Chinese take much the same position in modern Java that the Jews took in mediaeval Europe; they are giving the natives some primary economic education, and they are hated for it just as the Jews were hated” (12). The Chinese

population becomes an extension of colonial benevolence, and the fault lies with the native population that is too uncultured and uncouth to recognise the helping hand extended to it. Though these stereotypes originate with the colonial presence in the region, they have persisted even past independence and continue to influence subconscious attitudes towards the Malay population to this day.

Alatas suggests that the perception of Malay indolence comes specifically from the fact that the native Malay population largely dissociated itself from the presence of colonial powers. An “unwillingness to become a tool in the production system of colonial capitalism” as well as the fact that the Europeans living in urban areas “had very little experience of Malays serving them” contributed to the perception that the Malay population was unwilling to work altogether (Alatas 72). As Alatas points out, if Malays had been as disinclined to work as the stereotype suggested, they would not have survived as a people (79). However, since their work is not in service of colonial powers, but rather targeted at their own livelihood and serving their own people, they become victims of implicit colonial arrogance – if the work does not benefit the colonial powers, then it surely does not count as real work, and the Malays may be safely described as being unwilling to perform work; therefore, they are, as a population, lazy. “Industriousness meant working at sub-human level in colonial capitalist setting,” Alatas writes. The colonialists set the terms of what counts as work, and when the native population does not engage in precisely what’s expected of them, they become fair game to be negatively stereotyped.

Having established that the stereotype was a false construction meant to shore up personal biases and beliefs rather than an impression based on fact, it is also important to recognise that this stereotyping was not, for the most part, a deliberate and conscious effort. “The portrayal of the native was part of a total ideological campaign, which was carried out without any deliberate instruction,” Alatas writes. “It was a collective reaction of a group moved by a common outlook and consciousness of interest” (217). This is relevant today, in that negative stereotyping of particular groups may not be overt or even intentional. However, one’s unconscious prejudices can lead one to unconsciously favouring particular perceptions in a case of confirmation bias. “[T]he negative traits were intensively treated while the positive were neglected,” Alatas writes in explaining the presentation of the native population

in scholarly literature, “hence a distorted and unbalanced picture emerged” (218). As long as the stereotype exists, rejecting this unbalanced portrayal requires active effort, especially since the bulk of it is often a subconscious awareness rather than overt prejudice.

Today, the myth of the lazy native persists in the perception of the Malay community in Singapore, though its precise appearance may have changed. The stereotype is softened and approached from an oblique angle, with criticisms levelled about how the Malay community has, for instance, comparatively higher unemployment and lower education levels than other races in Singapore. Reframing the stereotype in this context makes it sound like a factual and valid criticism; however, as Alatas has made clear, even scholarly research carries with it implicit biases. It is necessary to also consider the historical impact of colonial stereotyping and government policies, which would have affected not only those of other racial groups, but also the self-perceptions of younger generations growing up under such influences. In addition, when considering that the Malay population is working with a starting disadvantage, the strides it has made over time become clearer. For instance, the enrolment of Malay children in schools rose from 85% in 1980, to 99% (the national average) in 2005; over the same time period, the proportion of Malay children who obtained at least five O-level passes increased from 16% to 63%, while those who obtained at least two A- and two AO-level passes rose from 49% to 84%. These figures seem to fall short when compared to Chinese students – for O-level passes, the number increased from 44% to 84%, and for A- and AO-level passes, it increased from 68% to 92% over the same time (“Progress of the Malay Community in Singapore since 1980” 3-4). However, when comparing the improvements of each community over time, it becomes apparent that the Malay community is improving in educational attainment more rapidly than the Chinese community is. Despite the common stereotype that Malay students are poorer performers, therefore, it is apparent that the community as a whole is catching up quickly.

Despite this, the perception persists, and will not be so easily eradicated, rooted as it is in decades of misinformation. Suriani Suratman points out that even while the government praises the Malay community for improvement in certain

areas, it then reinforces the stereotype that Malays are “lagging behind other ethnic groups” using two key methods:

Firstly it continuously identified new areas which require attention. From the three areas i.e. education, employment and housing defined in the 1960s and 1970s, focus was given to educational achievements in the 1980s. The focus was further narrowed down in the 1990s to performance in specific subjects i.e. English, Mathematics and Science. As such, when Malays have made progress in overall educational achievement for example, attention is directed a low performance level of Malay students in the specific subjects. Secondly, it makes comparisons of progress between ethnic groups at a given point in time instead of looking at longitudinal progress. Thereby it can be shown that there is always a gap between the performance of Malay students and Chinese and Indian students. (Suratman 20)

Shifting the goalposts in this manner means that the Malay community can never truly escape the stigma of its associated stereotypes. However, such shifting may not necessarily be malicious, in the same way much of colonial stereotyping wasn't. Rather, it is indicative of confirmation bias at work – since we “know” the Malay population to be comparatively lazier and uneducated, we look for such proof and ignore any contradictory data as irrelevant outliers.

Clive Day compares the Chinese and Jewish populations in explaining native faults (qtd. Alatas 12), but modern-day Jewish and Malay populations also share a similarity – overt stereotyping and racism towards either population is no longer socially acceptable in the present day; society generally accepts that the image of the lazy native is a harmful and untruthful stereotype, and outright belief in such stereotypes only hold sway on the fringes of society. But even a popularly dismissed stereotype can still hold unconscious sway, and so requires individuals to always be aware of their thoughts and actions in this respect – this idea will be discussed in greater detail later in this essay. An instinctive reaction can be overcome with education, and Alatas' work is one part of this education. Alatas argues that bias can be upheld even in purportedly objective scholarly work. What more in popular culture, which is so often thought of as being unthinking entertainment? The way that

groups of people are portrayed has at least a subconscious impact on the public mind. Conversely, positive and varied portrayals of those same groups in popular media must then be able to modify that impact.

Representation

The debate about the representative role of literature is not a new one, but it is one that has had new vigour injected into it in recent years. The advent of feminist, postcolonial, postmodern, and other such modes of critical thinking have foregrounded voices that have been largely ignored for decades or centuries prior. With this have come the questions of whether literature is capable of representing the world, and in which case how it does so, what that representation means, and where it might take us.

Investigating the question of whether literature can represent anything at all, James Young concludes that literature rises beyond semantic representation (broadly, statements of fact) to utilise illustrative representation in discussing an object or person ("Representation in Literature" 137-142). An "illustration represents by depicting (aspects of) its object" (136), and literature is representative in this way when its characters or objects depict "aspects of" a type of person or place. By placing specific words in the mouth of a specific type, a writer can represent a person, group of people, or even an idea. For Young, literature need not "assert truths, [but] it can still reveal them" (142). He argues that literature hence does have the ability to represent, and that this ability is revelatory to the reader. The position he articulates here is further detailed in another essay, where he suggests that literature's strength lies in representing things not precisely as they are, but in picking aspects to highlight in some way. He suggests that

The mere re-presentation of objects as they appear in ordinary experience (even if it is possible) is unlikely to contribute much to our knowledge of the world. The arts can best contribute to our knowledge of the world by representing objects in such a way that we acquire a perspective on the objects that does not result from ordinary experience of them. When the arts represent objects in such a manner, we can see or think about objects in ways which may not have been suggested by our ordinary experience of them. ("Inquiry in the Arts and Sciences" 260)

This line of thinking suggests that art's purpose is to represent the world in a manner that is unlike "ordinary experience," in order that that difference may shed light upon the object being described. Familiarity dulls the mind in representing objects; the reader or viewer grows inured to the object in reality, and so a representation of the object-as-is does not instigate deeper investigation. The key lies in driving the viewer past that instinctive indifference in some way in order to break their expectations regarding represented objects. In drawing a distinction between the object-as-is and the represented-object, even the most intransigent mind is forced at least to query the nature of the object. This opens the reader or viewer to the possibility of investigating objects, people, or practices that are normalised in society's view.

Science fiction offers an often obvious kind of difference, with alien people, technologies, or worlds that immediately place human norms in danger. Changing the world in which we live, or even removing oneself from it entirely compels readers to examine both the innate and learned prejudices they hold, and which have often been held since childhood. For example, children begin to differentiate between sexes by the age of 2, and between ethnicities by ages 3-5 (Ambady, et. al. 385), and this leads into identifying groups with the stereotypes associated with those groups. As young children are less able to understand nuance, they accept stereotypes as fact unless taught otherwise, and by the age of 10, their stereotypes already resemble those held by adults (Ambady et. al. 385-386). These prejudices are learned young and therefore are difficult to identify without guidance; they must be actively overcome with education and self-reflection. (This idea will be addressed in detail later in this essay.) In such an environment, the arts provide one means of self-examination, and science fiction in particular is often built around the question of "what if *this* was different?"

There are, however, two points to consider in relation to the above. First, the matter of *what* is represented is essential. Authors themselves bear the same prejudices that, in an ideal world, the arts would illuminate. One who does not realise they hold a particular view may not realise it is something that could or should be challenged. Suppose that View A goes unchallenged by the majority of science fiction writers, while any number of other views is examined critically. In this scenario, View A becomes less important by virtue of sheer numbers. At best, it is thought of as

trivial, and at worst, its relevance to society is called into question. In majority terms, View A has become reinforced rather than critically examined; its relative lack of attention becomes proof that it needs no criticism.

This is a phenomenon that may be observed in the interactions between dominant and marginalised groups. Dominant groups – for instance, white people, or men, or heterosexual people – are unlikely to understand all the ways in which the power structure that they benefit from should be criticised. Marginalised voices have been gaining traction especially in this era of social media, but the most well-intentioned heterosexual, white, man cannot understand the *lived* realities of those who are at the mercy of existing power structures. He can get close to it, and the more he studies and researches the voices of those who experience that reality, the closer he gets and the more clearly he can articulate those voices, for instance through literature. If he does not conduct such research, however, he runs the risk of writing stereotypes *because* he knows no better. Power structures by their nature are not typically overt. Rather, they function by subtle reinforcement of social messages, so that those within its grasp, including those who benefit from it, do not realise how they are manipulated by it. The power this heterosexual white man has is invisible to him, and so he does not understand what it means to live without that power. He must first recognise the existence of something he does not understand, before he can empathise with it. View A is invisible because so few write about it, and because it is not often written about, it is not recognised as something to be critically studied. It becomes mired in a trap. Its lack of recognition drives it further and further into the background.

Historical analysis also bears this out. One need only study a list of books traditionally accepted as literary canon in order to see this played out. Until recently, “literary canon” was synonymous with the “Western canon,” which at once precluded writers and viewpoints from any other country. Within this restricted view, the majority of writers were men, or white, or both. Recent critics have argued for the inclusion of, for example, women and postcolonial writers in the literary canon, and this view now holds increasing sway. In considering the myth of the anonymous woman poet in the Romantic era, Paula Feldman concludes that “the exclusion of women’s voices from the ever-changing canon of romantic-era literature says more, in

many ways, about the twentieth century than about the nineteenth” (Feldman 284). She contends that the silencing of women writers is a modern phenomenon, and not one wrought by the society of the time. Contrary to the popular image of the Romantic woman writer who must publish anonymously for fear of being ridiculed, women writers of the era published under their names at least as often as men did, and anonymity was used equally by both men and women in select cases (284). Feldman writes that changing literary tastes caused the suppression of Romantic literature as “naïve, melodramatic, and embarrassingly sentimental” (284). When it was rediscovered, scholars dismissed women writers as being only “sisters, friends, wives, and mothers... even excluded from consideration as ‘minor’ writers,” so that “[b]y the 1960s, five male poets constituted the romantic-era canon” (284). The sensibilities of the 1960s were what shaped the literary canon, rather than Romantic sensibilities. This happened because the men who formed the dominant power structure looked only to that which was written by men as being “valid.” It was not until the increased influence of women and various feminist movements in modern times that women writers from the Romantic era began to be recognised once more (284). This is an example of “View A” – in this case, that women have a voice, and it is one that is worth listening to. It was dismissed for decades because the voices that were socially prioritised were those of men, and because those who were compiling lists of canonical books were men who did not see men’s voices as being limiting or limited in any way. It was only when more people began to write about women authors that those women authors began to edge their way into literary canon.

But these are not new ideas. As early as 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which is today regarded as one of the earliest feminist critiques. Centuries before Feldman’s criticism of “conservatives, who show contempt for blue-stockings and other intellectual and creative women” (Feldman 284), Wollstonecraft condemned

men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only

anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition,
and by their abilities and virtues exact respect. (Wollstonecraft 171)

Wollstonecraft's feminism was a product of its time, and one that has been criticised as insufficient by modern feminists. But her *Rights of Women* is important in three aspects: first, in making clear that those not part of a group should not be the ones to define that group, for only stereotypes or wishful thinking may result from this, and second, in serving as an example of using difference to illustrate an object that requires deeper consideration than what she thought the majority of men of her time did. The third aspect involves her work's reception after her death. Though the *Rights of Women* had been well-received in her lifetime, her husband William Godwin's posthumous publication of her memoirs led to immediate criticism of Wollstonecraft. An introduction to her work explains that Godwin's frankness about Wollstonecraft "saddled [her] with a scandalous reputation so enduring" that even advocates of women's rights would avoid mention of her *Rights of Women* for decades thereafter, with the text only beginning to gain recognition once more in the later decades of the twentieth century (Norton 170). It is evident therefore that though a dissenting voice may make itself known, the dominant power structure will shout it down, intentionally or otherwise. It was not only men who dismissed Wollstonecraft's work on the basis of her socially unacceptable lifestyle; women did so as well, because they were equally part of the power structure, and either felt that her thoughts were unacceptable, or that they would suffer social denigration for claiming agreement. It took the rise of feminism, and of supporting voices, for the *Rights of Women* to find its way into the canon.

It seems then that a certain volume of representation is necessary before society will examine any idea in the critical fashion that writers hope for. James Young suggests this when he writes that "selection... the process of choosing objects, or aspects of objects, for representation," is one means through which difference may be shown ("Inquiry in the Arts and Sciences" 261). He invokes Diderot's response to critics of Richardson's depictions of "the mundane events which we experience every day": "such things do happen every day under your eyes but you do not see them" (261). This could as well be applied to the earlier feminist arguments raised by Feldman and Wollstonecraft. Women existed, but men "d[id] not see them," and so

their voices were silent. They were the invisible View A, which needed to gain supporters before it could become validated. In the modern context, marginalised voices must be selected for representation so that their marginalisation and probable suffering at the hands of the dominant group can thus become a matter for examination. Of course, the dominant group is likely, as in the case of Wollstonecraft, to either reject such voices or overwhelm them with their own. The latter is even more problematic when the dominant group's voices depict often harmful stereotypes or caricatures of marginalised groups, because these marginalised voices then have to fight not only for representation, but also against their stereotyped representation. For one who knows no better, the stereotype *is* the group.

This leads us to the second point to consider in Young's suggestion that artists must use difference in order to prompt self-examination. He writes that art which "aim[s] to mirror objects or, in other words, to represent objects as nearly as possible as they appear in our ordinary experience," is a "naïve and old-fashion conception of art" ("Inquiry in the Arts and Sciences" 260). This may in itself be a naïve statement in its generality. Though he admits that selecting that which is not often depicted is an important part of demonstrating difference, he does not then proceed to consider whether such a depiction should not attempt to portray the object-as-is, or the varied positions that one might take within such a stance. The crux of the problem lies with the perception of both author and audience. A member of a privileged group might perhaps be required to view objects through the lens of difference, that is to say in a non-stereotypical fashion, for there is otherwise no discomfort in their perception of the world. A member of a marginalised group, on the other hand, who must contend with a lack of representation, or that representation being largely stereotyped when it exists, might have a strong preference for their group being depicted as-is – that is to say, as *they* view it, rather than as a privileged person might. Such a depiction would be simultaneously that of the object-as-is for the marginalised person, but also the represented-object to the privileged person.

In addition, the issue of volume arises once more in considering representations of marginalised groups. Without significant numbers to match the dominant group, View A becomes lost. If View A has those numbers, then it has the flexibility to portray varied aspects of an object. A book might emphasise one aspect,

a play another, a film a third, and so on. The aspect is representative of the specific object, not of the group that the object belongs to. Racial representation in media is illustrative of this. As an example, Young suggests that Jane Austen's "descriptions of Mr Collins are representations of a class of person: the self-important, pompous and obsequious toady[...] many readers recognise Mr Collins as standing for a familiar type" ("Representation in Literature" 133). In this sense, Mr Collins represents a personality type, but this personality type is not ascribed to his race in the way that racial stereotypes (whether accepted or rejected) hold that Jewish people are miserly or black people are aggressive. As the dominant group in this example, white people have the luxury of not being confined to stereotypes. A white character may be villain or hero or anything in between, without their personalities being ascribed to their race. On the other hand, suppose a black character is cast as villain: it becomes an enforcement of the "black people are aggressive" stereotype, which has little in the way of other representations to counter it. When View A does not have the numbers that dominant narratives do, it becomes constrained in its representation. It cannot hope to articulate all aspects of an object or person when some of those aspects appear to reinforce negative stereotypes. Is the author then obliged to illustrate only those other aspects of the object or person? If they do so, on the one hand they are certainly selecting aspects of the object that are not often represented, but on the other hand, do they not run the risk of being accused of sanitising this representation such that it cannot be believed? In this latter scenario, might the dominant group reading this representation conclude that it is unrealistic and hence dismiss it, instead of allowing it provoke self-reflection? The author becomes caught in a societal trap. Either way, he has his critics. The only escape is for the volume of such representational work to increase, so that it reaches the reach of the dominant groups, and in this manner has the freedom to explore all aspects of an object or person without tying that exploration to a stereotype.

Of course, one significant question arises at this point. Stereotypes may be an ingrained way of viewing groups, but what is the extent of their influence, and how do they shape the way we approach literature? To answer this question, this essay turns to specific examples of stereotypes about ethnicity, gender, and mental illness, in examining the ways in which stereotypes affect various groups of people.

Stereotypes and Prejudice

Roger Levesque defines prejudice as

a disposition consisting of three components. The first component involves a cognitive element, which constitutes basic knowledge, views, or beliefs about a target group or its members. [...] The second aspect of prejudice, the affective component, involves feelings associated with the group. [...] Lastly, the conative component involves the predisposition to behave in a particular manner toward the target group. [...] The term 'prejudice,' then, denotes the beliefs, feelings and attitudes that predispose individuals to act in certain ways towards others. (Levesque 58).

It is important to note that none of these components need to be acted upon for a person to hold a prejudice. They are "loaded cognitive and emotional activities that occur in individuals' minds and that may be hidden from external observation" (Levesque 58). "Discrimination," on the other hand, moves prejudice into the realm of "actual actions with social consequences" (59). It may take the overt form of negative treatment of the group discriminated against, or the more subtle form of favouritism towards the "in-group." Earlier scholarship that viewed prejudice as something that was held and expressed consciously has been supplanted by new theories that "have expanded the understanding of prejudice to include a lack of awareness and unintentional activation" (Levesque 60). Levesque contends that this kind of prejudice can exist unconsciously, and may remain even when a person works to overcome it. In other words, the process of self-reflection is two-fold. First, a person must recognise that a particular view they hold is prejudiced, and second, they must recognise that even if they recognise this, their subconscious biases are still influencing them.

Levesque writes that "all forms of prejudice rely on the activation of stereotypes... they are natural and common ways of thinking that serve as mental shortcuts that allow us to function in society" (60-61). The human brain operates by categorisation, and will automatically process people of certain groups together. These groups may be socially determined, but even if the groups change, the *existence* of such categorisation, and therefore of stereotypes, will not change. In that

case, prejudice too is unavoidable no matter the person. However, Levesque's differentiation of prejudice and discrimination is vital to remember. Prejudice is not always acted upon, and therefore need not always lead to discrimination. At the same time, it must also be recalled that "unintentional activation" can lead to inadvertent discrimination even in individuals who might be conscious of their prejudice. In such individuals, the expression of discrimination may be less overt; for instance, in the form of encouraging the favoured group rather than suppressing the other. The more negative the emotional association, the more likely it is that discrimination may occur, and the more overt it may be (Levesque 65-66), but discrimination does not need to be overt to have a strong impact on those it acts upon. This leaves us with the conclusion that stereotyping is natural, prejudice is unavoidable, and discrimination is a probable, though not definite, consequence.

Though stereotyping is a natural function of the way the human brain works, prejudice is learned. The sources of learned prejudice are complex. Levesque refers to a study which implicates "the stronger influence of the social context on prejudice with increasing age" (80), which is to say that as children grow, their social groups affect the types of prejudices they hold. Parental influence has historically been believed to be a significant contributing factor, but studies have shown that it is neither the largest, nor that it works alone. It is also "fraught with complexities: a recent study found that, although children's racial attitudes were not related to their parents' explicit racial attitudes, they did seem to be impacted by the mothers' (but not the fathers') implicit beliefs" (Levesque 80). Children thus seem able to pick up on unintentional cues, even if their parents do not display overt discrimination. The distinction between children's responses to their mothers' and fathers' attitudes further complicates attempts at understanding how prejudice may be learned. More recent research also suggests that peer groups have a stronger influence on prejudice than was initially believed, though this has not been as widely studied as parental influence on prejudice has been. Levesque describes one study that first measured racial prejudice in eight- to eleven-year old children, before then pairing a high-prejudiced child with a low-prejudiced child to discuss their ratings. Those who initially reported high levels of prejudice reported lower levels of prejudice when re-measured after the discussion. However, this can function in the opposite way as well,

with children from dominant groups, especially those who are more aggressive about their beliefs, being able to utilise peer pressure to perpetuate negative beliefs and expectations about children from marginalised groups. This, and the other few studies into the effects of peer pressure that exist, “underscore that peer socialization underlies the development and proliferation of prejudiced attitudes” (Levesque 81).

The last significant contributor is the mass media, which “perpetuates... stereotypes over time, in spite of decreases in real-world stereotyped behaviors... and even creates markets based on stereotypes” (Levesque 82). The advertising market in particular relies on enforcing social stereotypes in order to guide particular segments of society towards (or away from) particular products. The distinct pink and blue division of any major toy store reveals this in action, with “dolls” marketed as being for girls (the stereotype of women as innately passive and nurturing) and “action figures” marketed as being for boys (the stereotype that men are active go-getters). Even the terminology is different for what is essentially the same type of product, because advertisers choose to reinforce the social differences in order to encourage sales in one direction or other. This may seem a benign example, but this typing of social groups has serious implications when negative associations are made. Social research has proven that “even exposure to brief advertisements profoundly influences the way people perceive and relate to one another... as is well known, the media perpetuates stereotypical images of youth that become part of public consciousness, as revealed by portrayals of minority youth as problematic and subject to criminal behavior” (Levesque 82). The use of stereotypes as shorthand for the human brain to categorise and understand people is not in and of itself a problem, but the media often conflates such a stereotype with a negative attitude, thus embedding the negative emotion in the subconscious of those who watch it. As previously mentioned, the more negative the emotion associated with the prejudice, the more likely that it will result in some form of discrimination. In this way, the media both demonstrates and reinforces prejudice. The social environment, including parental or adult influence, peer groups, and media, thus shapes how children perceive members of various groups. This has multiple real-world consequences, which we may examine through the intersection of three commonly held prejudices,

in terms of gender, ethnicity, and mental illness, and the ways they affect various communities.

Intersections: Gender, Ethnicity, Mental Illness

Though children as young as two or three can begin to distinguish themselves from others (in terms of sex, ethnicity, etc.), they only begin to understand broadly held stereotypes at about the age of six, continuing till the age of eleven, by which point “children have mastered all aspects of stereotype-consciousness” (McKown and Weinstein 498-499; McKown and Strambler 1654). Being able to comprehend broadly held stereotypes has a direct effect on not only the child’s views, but also their active performance and understanding of others’ actions. As an example, McKown and Strambler’s study found that

African American and Latino students who were aware of broadly held stereotypes performed more poorly on a working memory task when the task was characterized as diagnostic of ability than when the same task was characterized as nondiagnostic of ability. In contrast, children from nonstereotyped ethnic groups and children who were not aware of broadly held stereotypes performed the same on the task regardless of how it was characterized. These findings suggest that when children from stereotyped ethnic groups develop knowledge of broadly held stereotypes, they become vulnerable to situations in which their performance may be interpreted as confirming a negative stereotype about their group, hampering performance in a self-fulfilling prophecy. (McKown and Strambler 1655)

In addition, the study found that the older the child, the more they were affected. Merely being aware of popular stereotypes held about their group influenced their performance in a negative way. Their improved performance when the task was characterised as non-diagnostic proves that the child’s innate ability is hampered by knowledge of what *others* think. This is referred to as “stereotype threat,” when the social environment “activates a relevant stereotype” which then affects a child’s performance (McKown and Weinstein 500). Crucially, “stereotypes may be activated indirectly when the social context invokes stereotypes without explicitly priming a

stereotyped identity” (McKown and Weinstein 501). In other words, even when the social environment does not explicitly enforce the stereotype, implicit belief in the stereotype still affects children’s performance.

Yet another study found similar results to hold true: when Asian-American children had specific parts of their identities activated (Asian-American vs. girl or boy), their subsequent performance in a mathematical task was impacted. The stereotypes at play here are that Asian-Americans are good at mathematics, and that girls are worse than boys at mathematics. The girls “performed better when their Asian identity was activated and more poorly when their gender identity was activated, compared with a neutral condition” (Ambady et. al. 387). The boys performed better when both their Asian-American identity and gender identity were activated (388). The activation of gender identity in girls parallels McKown and Strambler’s study in that awareness of the stereotype hampered the girls’ abilities in a “self-fulfilling prophecy.” Intriguingly, the study by Ambady et. al. found that the performance of children between the ages of eight and ten improved when their gender identity was activated. The study credits this phenomenon to children at this age being “extremely chauvinistic about their gender identity” as well as the possibility that they “want to distance themselves from their minority ethnic identity, trying to fit in with the majority” (389). The trend does reverse itself from the age of eleven, reverting to the standard patterns described above; however, the existence of this discrepancy suggests that it is possible to rebel against social expectations regarding stereotypes. Ambady et. al. suggest that “performance is malleable and sensitive to situational and psychological cues,” and that it may therefore be possible to positively influence children by providing them with “alternative positive stereotypes and positive role models that can be harnessed in appropriate situations” (389). This opens two questions for consideration: first, might positive stereotyping (“Asian-Americans are good at mathematics”) be a helpful way to examine the world, and second, in what ways might children’s understanding of stereotypes be influenced in order to change their perceptions?

On the face of it, positive stereotypes seem like they might provide a useful push for certain groups of people, including marginalised groups. If activating the Asian-American stereotype of being smarter than average enables Asian-American

children to perform better in a positive form of self-fulfilling prophecy, then it logically follows that other groups may be able to utilise similar positive stereotypes to aid their members. However, this is too simplistic a hope. The obvious issue at hand is that a positive stereotype for one group necessarily denigrates other groups in comparison. Once again, the issue of the point of view is crucial, though perhaps in reverse of the earlier discussion about represented-objects versus the object-as-is. In this scenario, the stereotype is preferred by the marginalised group as it encourages positive growth rather than a negative self-image. The outcome, however, remains the same. The marginalised group maintains a positive portrayal relative to societal expectations. It may be argued that in the example of the Asian-American child, a comparison against a white child does not *negatively* impact the white child, who instead is starting from a neutral base – but it may adversely affect a black child, who is already starting from the stereotype that black children are below average in intelligence. In addition, stereotypes are too varied for a neat pattern to be built in this manner. The Asian-American *child* might be seen as better in mathematics, but the Asian-American *girl* is thought to be poorer in the same. Intersections of power groups and marginalisation make it difficult to ensure positive stereotyping works as uniformly as might be hoped for.

In addition, even when viewed in a straightforward light (e.g. looking purely at ethnic identity activation and minimising the effects of gender identity activation), positive stereotyping does not actually always have a positive effect. Studies have shown that positive stereotyping can also be the source of distress. The stereotype of Asian-Americans being academically talented seems to negate the possibility of stereotype threat, which as earlier mentioned is the tendency for students to fall into a self-fulfilling prophecy when confronted with a negative stereotype about them. However, this positive stereotype “could represent a very public challenge to individuals of Asian descent that they *must* possess high levels of education; and those who either do not possess the intellectual capacity or have the desire to excel educationally may experience increased psychological anxiety and distress for having ‘let down their race’” (Cocchiara and Quick 782). Those within the ethnic group who feel that they do not conform to the stereotype react in the same way as if it were a negative stereotype, and their performance dips accordingly. In addition, beyond the

mental aspect already discussed, there may also be a physical component to this reaction. Cocchiara and Quick quote studies which have found that African American people suffer from physical problems such as increased blood pressure or heightened cardiovascular activity “after being exposed to racist provocations,” even if they had no prior history of such problems (781). They suggest that similar health issues may arise in the case of positive stereotyping, though few studies currently exist to back up this theory. It is apparent, however, that even positive stereotyping can cause great distress to its victims, and that one cannot therefore depend on it wholly to improve the lot of any group.

Thus far, the effects of stereotypes on children have been made clear. It remains to be investigated whether these last into adulthood, where one might presume greater knowledge would prevent prejudicial attitudes. Levesque explains that people can be categorised into three groups: those who have an automatic negative association with a group and express it (i.e. who are “truly prejudiced”); those who have an automatic negative association but work to counter it, either due to an awareness of how distasteful the reaction is, or the desire to present themselves in a socially acceptable way; and those who do not experience any automatic negative association (i.e. the “truly nonprejudiced”) (61-62). However, given the fact that the human brain works by categorising people and objects, it is unlikely that the third group of truly non-prejudiced people exist. There will always be a categorical representation of a group of people that needs to be overcome (Levesque 62). The goal, therefore, is to move people from the first group into the second, and to encourage critical reflection on the stereotypes that leap to mind when engaging with a particular social group. Of course, one must at the same time be aware of a kind of observer effect, whereby the very act of reflection may cause one to engage those biases to some extent. It is possible to act against the immediate stereotyped portrayal, but it is an on-going and life-long process.

For example, stereotypes associated with Jewish people are largely viewed as inappropriate today. Though anti-Semitism does still exist in parts of society, for the most part, such stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, have been rejected by social convention. However, as previously mentioned, subconscious cues still remain even in the minds of those who overtly reject such prejudice. Berinsky and

Mendelberg suggest that what changes is the means of expression, which is to say that there is a culturally appropriate manner in which to express this prejudice, so that its form might alter even as the underlying stereotype remains (845). They specifically investigate political positions in relation to the issue of stereotypes, and whether Jewish leaders are at a disadvantage due to unconscious biases, and find that socially unacceptable stereotypes are often mapped onto a more socially appropriate difference, with the latter becoming the quoted reason for a negative attitude. Specifically, two stereotypes about Jewish people come into play here: the social stereotype of “Jews as greedy, power-hungry, and shady,” and the “political trait of being liberal” (847-848). Though the former is socially repudiated, it becomes conflated with the latter, which becomes an acceptable mode of expressing bias. Even if a person consciously rejects the social stereotype, the political stereotype may continue to colour perceptions of the Jewish person’s behaviours, so that even conservative behaviour is seen as being more liberal (848). Berinsky and Mendelberg’s study even tests specifically for whether being “liberal” is the marker that denotes a change in support amongst test participants, but their results show that it is only when Jewish ethnicity is invoked that such a change occurs (854). One might suppose that the activation of such stereotypes would only occur with conservatives, but this study shows that even self-identified liberals fall prey to following stereotypes, if less obviously than with conservative participants (854-855).

Berinsky and Mendelberg conclude that though negative stereotypes of Jewish people have been widely rejected, their results show that activating those traits can still trigger a “process of stereotyping by which Jewish candidates could lose political support” (856). They explain that the process

[...] is both cognitive and affective. It is cognitive in the sense that stereotypic social and political traits are linked together within a cognitive structure that resides in memory. The discredited social traits are activated but controlled, while the more legitimate political trait is activated and not overridden. Because the social is linked to the political, stereotyping can carry an important indirect consequence for political judgments. But stereotyping is not only cognitive, it can also be evaluative. Many of the social stereotype traits of social groups with

a history of disadvantage are negative. We found that only when a negative social trait is cued does the target of the stereotype suffer adverse consequences; the group label, which is evaluatively neutral, causes little harm by itself. (856)

In other words, the label of “Jew” causes no damage unless the negative stereotype is activated, in which case it triggers prejudice and discrimination in the manner that Levesque describes. However, it is clear that such activation occurs much more often than might have been expected, and often on an unconscious level. Being aware of stereotypical representations allows a person to act against those representations, though as previously stated, this is an on-going process and one that will always remain imperfect.

Gender stereotypes function in the same way. Though it is now impolitic to claim that women are inferior to men, it cannot be argued that many parts of society still subconsciously enforce this idea. A study by Judith Howard that aimed to analyse the role of gender stereotypes in responses to victims of crime found that “[g]ender clearly structures reactions to victims” (270, 279). Not only were female victims deemed more vulnerable to victimisation, they were also more likely to be blamed for their assault, “attesting to the strength of the cultural devaluation of feminine characteristics” (280). This was the case for both female and male respondents, demonstrating that members of a marginalised group (women) can and do enforce the same stereotypes that they are subject to. Howard writes that “[v]ictimization appears to be perceived as a feminine and potentially feminizing experience” (270). The stereotype of females being weaker, more passive, and more vulnerable is at play here, triggering the prejudice that women are less capable, and therefore subtly colouring perceptions of the female victims in a different manner to the male victims. Intriguingly, women were blamed more for their victimisation when they conformed to stereotype (“the victim’s trusting nature, passivity, and carelessness”), whereas men were blamed more when they did *not* conform to stereotype (“failure to fight back, looking scared, not trying to escape” (279)). Though this appears to be a contradictory position, it in fact points to a reinforcement of social stereotypes on both men and women – in both cases, the victim is still blamed for their actions in relation to the stereotype. In addition, women are most likely to “incur blame and to

be derogated in accord with gender stereotypes” when they are “victimized in a manner consistent with crime stereotypes, or ‘normal’ crimes” (270), suggesting an interplay of multiple stereotypes in affecting judgement of the victims.

Angela Gallegos-Castillo comes to a similar conclusion in writing about Latina girls in the context of family. She writes that a common dissatisfaction amongst the young women she interviews “is that Mexican family gender expectations are viewed as unjust and oppressive” (44). Gallegos-Castillo does view the family as more important in shaping social stereotypes than Levesque might. She echoes a number of other studies when she writes that “it is *la familia* that imparts values, beliefs, traditions, and culture to each family member and directly influences how one experiences the world. For Latinos, *familismo*, the strong identification, loyalty, and attachment to family members, is considered one of the most important culture-specific values” (45). Cultural specificity may account for the difference in the impact the familial structure makes in the shaping of stereotype awareness in children. In this instance, Gallegos-Castillo identifies family as being a strong component of identity for Mexican youth growing up in a society that likely views them through the lens of various negative stereotypes (45). However, “[f]or Mexican-origin adolescent girls, the burden is accentuated by their female status” (45).

The intersection of stereotypes is at play here, with Latina girls having to contend with both racial stereotypes and gender stereotypes. Even if the former is not overtly expressed in the familial sphere, the latter still is, and therefore the pressures of stereotypes cannot be avoided. The adolescents interviewed in Gallegos-Castillo’s study invariably describe having to perform household chores that their male siblings do not, having to cater to their male family members (e.g. serving them food and drinks even on the heels of a long day at work), and being restricted in their social interactions whether at home or outside, again, in ways that their male siblings do not face (48-50). Gallegos-Castillo points out that the bulk of “social reproductive labor still falls on women’s shoulders. Few, if any, household responsibilities are assigned to men, who usually are responsible for weekly yard work, a task that is viewed as men’s work” (49). This plays into the familiar stereotype of women as passive caregivers and men as physically superior – the same stereotype that influenced the way respondents reacted to victims in Howard’s study.

Gallegos-Castillo further writes that a “mother’s role in a young woman’s quest for identity and self-empowerment is an interesting and often contentious one” (50). Mothers may enforce social stereotypes even as they encourage their daughters to break free of them, leading to confusion. “While mothers might want their daughters to live a life different than their own, too few mothers know how to go about living differently,” Gallegos-Castillo explains (50), leading to contradictory actions and statements that undermine any message the young girl might hear about overcoming social stereotypes – she does not know if “she is supposed to resist, reinvent, or acquiesce” (51). Gallegos-Castillo suggests that the answer is “not to choose among the three options but to know when to utilize each” (51). Though this suggestion seems a workable solution, it does not seem practically helpful for a young girl navigating familial attitudes that seem to keep changing. At the same time, as Levesque suggests, she is subject to pressures from the mass media and peer groups to conform to the specific stereotype of a Latina girl. There are multiple, intersectional pressures on her – as a Latina, as a female, as a member of the working-class, as a youth. It is evident that between the mass media, social expectation, and familial pressures, awareness of these social stereotypes is inescapable. It has also been established that mere awareness of these stereotypes is enough to impact one’s responses, even to oneself. This means in turn that these young girls are struggling not only against the social stereotypes applied to them, but also the possibility of them believing those stereotypes and falling prey to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the same way that ethnic and gender stereotypes accentuate each other, so too do gender and mental illness stereotypes. A study by Wirth and Bodenhausen investigates whether and how gender conformity to a specific mental illness affects the way it is perceived by society. They theorise that when a person acts in a manner that conforms to stereotypes, their action is perceived as being innate rather than a product of the environment. They cite a previous study which found that “when a Black American was accused of a white-collar crime (embezzlement), his behaviour was commonly attributed to a situational cause, whereas when the same actor was said to have committed a blue-collar crime (burglary), it was attributed to dispositional causes; this attributional pattern reversed for White defendants” (Wirth and Bodenhausen 169). Wirth and Bodenhausen hypothesise that conformity to

gender stereotypical mental illnesses would similarly provoke an attitude regarding whether the illness is due to a situational or dispositional cause. They pit two competing hypotheses against each other: first, that those who display non-stereotypical symptoms of mental illness receive greater sympathy as their illness is perceived as being out of their control, or second, that they would be punished for deviating from stereotypical gender norms (169-170). Their study concludes that the latter is not the case. Instead, conforming to gender stereotypes (the study focuses on reactions to male alcoholics and females with major depression) meant that respondents were more likely to “[blame] the victim for enacting more extreme forms of ‘typical’ behaviour patterns associated with their gender, presumably implying more personal responsibility” (172). This echoes Howard’s study, demonstrating that conformity to a stereotype can often increase the chances of being blamed, whether for being assaulted, or for having a mental illness.

What this means for the victim in question is a matter for debate. The traditional approach holds that “*social* devaluation will produce *self*-devaluation,” as we tend to view ourselves through the lens of socially appropriate norms (Thoits 7). Deviation from these norms triggers social disavowal, and this in turn exacerbates feelings of undesirability, or “internalized stigma” (Thoits 7). Peggy Thoits writes that

[c]lassic labelling theory holds that individuals who have been categorized by other people as deviant come to view themselves as deviant... especially when they are formally classified by powerful agents of social control. [...] stereotypes about mental illness become activated in the imaginations of other people. These stereotypes are learned early in life and are reinforced over time in ordinary interaction and by caricatures in the media. [...] Link’s modified labeling theory [argues that] labelled individuals themselves can inadvertently start a self-fulfilling process. [...] When individuals enter mental health treatment, they become labelled as ‘mental patients.’ At that point, mental illness stigma and stereotypes become personally relevant and threatening... Fearing devaluation and rejection, patients/consumers attempt to ward off such consequences by using one or more of three coping strategies: secrecy about their patient history (‘passing’ as

normal)... withdrawal from interactions with all but close family or friends, and educating others about mental illness. (Thoits 7-8)

The first two coping strategies in particular can often backfire on patients, “increasing social isolation, discouraging pursuit of employment, and increasing demoralization” which in turn may trigger recurrences of the disorder, leading to a spiral of poor self-image (Thoits 8). Modified labelling theory holds that this is true even if the patient does not “accept their official categorizations as self-descriptive” (8). As is the case with other stereotypes, a person who rejects a particular categorisation is still subject to social influence and expectation based on that categorisation. In the case of mental illness, “damage to self-esteem should follow from the acquisition of a stigmatizing label, regardless of whether that label has been internalized or simply bestowed” (8). Thoits goes on to cite a large body of research literature that proves that “a stigmatized label and expectations and/or experiences of social rejection significantly diminish the life quality and life chances of consumers, countering earlier assertions that stigma has only minor or short-lived negative consequences for patients’ lives compared to the influence of their symptoms” (Thoits 8-9). This parallels the results of all the studies cited earlier in the idea that socially held stereotypes, whether rejected or accepted, can negatively impact the lives of those viewed through the lens of those stereotypes.

However, Thoits goes on to assert a more positive standpoint as far as resisting stereotypes goes. She offers two potential strategies, deflection or challenge, which could instigate positive changes in the mentally ill person’s life. With deflection, the person is aware of the stereotype applied to them, but does not deem it applicable to them for one or more of three reasons: first, their symptoms do not fit the stereotypes of mental illness, which are often extreme and uncharacteristic of the majority of psychiatric disorders; second, they consider their illness only a single part of them and not the whole; third, they view their illness as a temporary situation, often in response to a stressful time in their lives (Thoits 13). Thus, by distancing themselves from the stereotypes associated with mental illness, they “dramatically reduce, if not eliminate, potential threats to their self-regard” and hence are able to maintain their self-esteem at the same level it was before they were labelled with the stereotype (14). On the other hand, with the strategy of challenging, the person

attempts “to change other people’s views or behaviors instead of blocking their incursions on self-regard” (14). Challenging strategies may vary from deliberately presenting a non-stereotypical self to educating others about mental illness. This may have varying levels of success, with those close to the person being more likely to accept their refutation of the stereotype, but those who are not as close being unwilling to do the same (14-15). It is hence difficult to separate the two and determine what effect each might have on the person’s self-esteem, though as with strategies of deflection, it at least remains constant. Unlike deflective strategies, challenging strategies need not only be individualistic, but may also be collectivistic, “in the form of advocacy and activism by consumer groups aimed at changing societal beliefs and system-level discriminatory practices” (15). Participating in such collective resistance is often empowering for the person involved (15-16) and therefore is significant in mitigating the negative impact of social stereotypes.

The same situation may also be dealt with from the opposite direction, that is to say, the members of society who hold the stereotypes about mental illness. Corrigan et. al. establish that “behavior is determined by a cognitive-emotional process: persons make attributions about the *cause* and *controllability* of a person’s illness that lead to inferences about *responsibility*. These inferences lead to *emotional reactions* such as anger or pity that affect the likelihood of *helping* or *punishing behaviors*” (164-165). This echoes Levesque’s assertion that discrimination is rooted in an emotional response that is difficult to eliminate, even if the stereotype itself is rejected. However, Corrigan et. al. suggest that it is possible to code different emotional responses to be triggered in place of the previous negative emotion, which opens the possibility of a solution to Levesque’s prediction that even a consciously-rejected stereotype may still subconsciously influence a person’s thoughts and actions. Three elements are involved when a person judges someone based on a stereotype: perceived controllability, responsibility attributions, and emotional responses (Corrigan et. al. 172). The first refers to the degree to which a person is considered responsible for their illness (i.e. whether or not it is something they chose to do). The second point is related in that it determines how a person reacts to information regarding the controllability of the illness. If they believe the illness is the responsibility of the ill person, then they are likely to be unsympathetic, and this is

even more so the case if they believe the ill person to be dangerous. The last, of course, refers to the emotional reactions give the first two points. Anger and fear increase the likelihood of negative emotions and reactions, whereas pity – even in conjunction with anger – increases the chances of supportive behaviour (Corrigan et. al. 172). Fear, therefore, is the underlying emotion that most requires addressing in order to overcome the effect of stereotypes on society.

Two points may be ascertained from the above. First, deflection strategies are often crucial in maintaining self-esteem; this is of particular importance given the established impact of self-stigmatisation, even on an unconscious level. Second, collective resistance is essential in challenging social perceptions of stereotypes. The negative emotions associated with stereotypes can only be combated through challenging strategies such as education and activism. The collectivist possibilities inherent in such strategies are essential in that they provide the *volume* of anti-stereotypical voices necessary to effectively combat socially-acceptable stereotypes. Stereotypes about mental illness offer a contrast to the previously discussed (ethnic and gender) stereotypes in that they are not socially rejected in the same way. Many societies have in recent times taken strides forward in examining and treating mental illness, and rejecting commonly held stereotypes about it. However, this is still a work in progress and stereotypes about mental illness have not yet become universally rejected, even when looking within specific societies rather than world-wide. Collective resistance is hence the cornerstone to instigating and accelerating this process so that such these stereotypes lose their validity in the social consciousness. The fear that drives negative emotional reactions to stereotypes can be combated through education, and if that instinctive emotional response to a stereotype is manipulated to become something more positive, it may be possible even to overwrite the unconscious impulse towards prejudice that Levesque describes.

This begs the question of how such manipulation may occur, and so this essay returns to its beginning in examining the role of literature in representation. As has been previously established, increasing the volume of representation in media is essential in bringing stereotyped groups into the public eye. This is the first step in changing perceptions about those stereotypes. At the same time, literature that attempts to show the object-as-is, or in other words from the point of view of the

marginalised group, can play a role in indirectly educating the public as to the truth behind the stereotype. This is not to say that literature must be overtly didactic. The simple existence of characters from a marginalised group who are placed in roles not stereotypically available to them can change perceptions of what is possible from members of that group. If the black man is mild-mannered or good-humoured, the story need not explicitly spell out that he does not fit the “aggressive black man” stereotype. Positioning a variety of characters, even without commentary, in the roles that suit them as characters rather than as stereotypes, therefore, is one significant way in which literature can mould the perceptions of its readers.

Re-presenting Stereotypes

While investigating the possibilities inherent in literature's ability to affect its readers' perceptions, I discovered two works that would come to heavily influence my own views on the role that such literature can play. The first of these was Ursula K. LeGuin's novel *A Wizard of Earthsea*; the second was Chimamanda Adichie's TEDTalk, "The Danger of a Single Story"; the former was a slowly-dawning realisation, and the second the coalescence of everything I'd learned to that point.

I had read LeGuin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* for the first time when I was eighteen, and though it had had a profound impact on me then, it wasn't until years later that I made a connection to a broader way of looking at things. The novel is the first book in a fantasy series; a bildungsroman describing the journeys of an aspiring mage named Ged. The most unusual aspect of this fantasy was not the world of magic itself, but the fact that Ged and a number of supporting characters are not white. This fact is revealed only in the third chapter through a casual mention of Ged's "red-brown" skin, which is in turn cushioned by descriptions of a new place so that it is easily overlooked (45). It was an off-hand line that I re-read multiple times on my first read, unable to comprehend the idea of a non-white main character. It was something I had never before seen in a fantasy novel. LeGuin had deliberately omitted physical descriptions up until that point in order to prove that skin colour – or race – has no impact on the relatability of a character, or on who is qualified to undertake a heroic journey. In explaining this choice, she writes:

I was a little wily about my color scheme. I figured some white kids (the books were published for "young adults") might not identify straight off with a brown kid, so I kind of eased the information about skin color in by degrees – hoping that the reader would get "into Ged's skin" and only then discover it wasn't a white one. ("A Whitewashed Earthsea")

LeGuin's explanation that "some white kids" might be unable to identify with non-white protagonists seemed to me to be a deeply strange concept, because being identifying with a protagonist who looked nothing like me was what I had been doing all my life. It was not a choice given to me, since every popular fantasy or science

fiction book I picked up as a child or even as a teen was centred on a white protagonist – if I was lucky, at least it was a woman, though those were infrequent. *Ged* was my first encounter with anything else. The notion that anyone who looked like me could be interesting enough to be a main character was not something I had considered, because I had never seen it before. It was not a conscious degradation of myself; I was proud of my culture and heritage, and had no desire to be white. Even so, the surprise I felt on discovering *Ged*'s skin colour was my first inkling that there were some untrue beliefs that had been ingrained in me about my own people.

When I first read *A Wizard of Earthsea*, I did not think to link it to larger patterns in literature. I came to read more of LeGuin's works at a later date, and discovered that she repeatedly placed characters of colour in positions of importance in her works. "Whites are a minority on Earth now," she writes. "[W]hy wouldn't they still be either a minority, or just swallowed up in the larger colored gene pool, in the future?" ("*A Whitewashed Earthsea*"). In alignment with this belief, her works are unabashedly filled with characters whose skins are various shades of red or brown or black. It was still unusual to me, but I thought of it as a simple quirk of her writing, and did not question it.

Some years later, this novel and all the confused amazement it had inspired in me would come rushing back when I watched Chimamanda Adichie's TEDTalk. By this point, I had already realised that I felt a vague dissatisfaction with the books I was reading, and the feminist literature I was exploring. I had not, however, managed to quite pin down where that dissatisfaction stemmed from. Adichie's talk was a revelatory punch to the gut – everything she said resonated with me, even though we share neither race nor country. Instead, we had the shared experience of growing up reading books with white protagonists, and therefore believing that protagonists could only be white. Adichie describes writing about blue-eyed white children who played in the snow and drank ginger beer, despite never having seen snow or ginger beer in her life. As a child, that was what she knew to be in books, and so she thought that these were essential components of her own early writing. "Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign," she explains, "I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify." This was an experience

that resounded with painful familiarity with me. It took hearing it spelled out by Adichie for me to realise that I had fallen into the same trap of believing that certain portrayals (i.e. white protagonists) were more valid or notable, simply because that was what I had been exposed to all this time.

Adichie goes on to warn against the consequences of what she terms “a single story” – that is to say, a single perception of a person or group of persons, that leaves no room for any other facets of their beings to show. In describing an American roommate’s inability to relate to her, she says that “My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.” Her roommate had only ever been exposed to a particular story, of Africans as universally poor and from traditional tribal communities – as inevitably alien – and therefore could not conceive of any common ground between herself and Adichie. The manner in which this singular narrative is constructed is, of course, to “show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.” This is how stereotypes come into being; when a community is described in the same way repeatedly, that perception becomes part of the consciousness of those outside that community.

It is the dominant group that has the ability to write this single story, because the dominant group controls how other groups are seen in relation to it. Adichie says that

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, “secondly.”

All stories become a function of the story of the dominant group; all other people are considered only in relation to them, and not as people in their own right. In this way, it is possible to think of the members of these marginalised groups as being lesser beings, because the dominant group is the default position from which to start. Recollect Alatas’ commentary on how colonial forces *had* to create a myth of the lazy native in order to establish their hierarchical power over the native population, because if they saw the natives as being equal to them, they could not justify their

colonial practices. This pattern still holds, if often more subtly today, and with the widespread reach of media today means that popular culture has become a great avenue of reinforcing stereotypes. However, as the previous section of this essay concludes, it is also possible for media to provide a means of rebellion. Re-writing the “single story” of their identity is the means through which marginalised groups can allow their multifaceted natures to shine through.

Of course, such a presentation of marginalised groups is only possible if literature – and mass media in general – chooses to take the presented opportunity to give a voice to historically silenced groups as writers like LeGuin and Adichie do. Historically, this has not been a position that the mass media has taken.

This is especially evident when looking at patterns in popular films, which have a wide reach to a large audience and are therefore a useful metric for the media messages that are consciously or subconsciously taken in by the public. While some independent films may have tried to give a voice to marginalised groups, the popular Hollywood blockbusters typically fall back on the old formulae of white actors and white narratives. Calvin Baker suggests that there is resistance to putting serious money into films that break away from this formula (“Color Blind: A Pocket Guide to Race in America”) both in the media and public perception. He contends that “[i]n the movies, the public record of our collective unconsciousness, only a handful of actors (Denzel Washington, Forest Whitaker, Halle Berry) are permitted roles that showcase them in contexts that are not defined by their race.” Other than these few actors who have broken moulds, black actors are only given roles that position them in familiar stereotypes, and therefore do not push representational boundaries. Again, black audiences are both under-represented as well as misrepresented. In addition, white audiences have the status quo subtly reinforced, even if the film is not overtly addressing racism. Only the white character can be the hero. Black characters are there for support at best, but can never quite bridge the gap. Baker writes that “[w]hat the mainstream would seem to want from black writers are only stories of blackness written from a marginal position, on one hand to serve as witness and on the other to affirm for mainstream readers that they remain white, and so privileged.” This kind of writing only serves to further separate and diminish black people by insisting that the stereotype is all they are capable of. But this is exactly the kind of

writing that the film industry invests in, with the excuse that it is the kind of writing that in the past has proven to make money at box offices.

Time and again, Hollywood produces stories where white male narratives dominate. The film *The Last Airbender* had white actors play most of the main characters who, in the original series that the film was adapted from, were all from Asian cultures (if modified for the fantastical setting). Amongst the main characters, only the film's antagonist was non-white, obliquely invoking the familiar narrative of white people fighting against native savages. Similarly, *The Last Samurai* places a white man in the position of saving Japan and even, through his presentation of himself as "samurai," of being more authentically Japanese than the supporting Japanese characters. Even the film *Avatar* uses the same pattern, except that in this case the white lead saves a group of aliens, which of course could stand in for any marginalised group. Which group it is doesn't matter; what is important is that a white saviour arrives to grant benevolent assistance to a people who would suffer without him. But this is a pattern that has seen growing backlash from those communities being thus misrepresented. The casting of Scarlett Johansson as Major Motoko Kusanagi in the upcoming *Ghost in the Shell* film re-make, as well as Matt Damon's starring role in the recent *The Great Wall*, caused an online outcry even before the release of the films.

The latter had defenders who pointed to the large Chinese presence in making the film, most significant of whom was Chinese director Zhang Yimou; additionally, upon release, it is clear that the plot of the film arguably places Chinese values above white ones, with the mercenary white characters having to learn the true meaning of self-sacrifice and heroism from the Chinese characters. However, it is also true that the script was written by white men, with Zhang Yimou having little input in the storyline, and some early reviewers have commented that the fact shows in the way that the characters are written. "That only the characters played by Damon, Pascal and Willem Dafoe (as prisoner Ballard) feel like real, flawed humans," John Lui writes, "can be blamed on the fact that the writing team is entirely Western. The Chinese in the cast play the usual stoic, noble, selfless and completely unrelatable people seen in too many China-made productions" (Straits Times). The Chinese leads may be narratively elevated to moral superiority, but they fail to be more than archetypes.

Though Lui ascribes this to the overtly patriotic line the movie takes, it is worth considering that the white writers would have had a significant role in the portrayal of the Chinese characters as well, and therefore at least part of the reason for such a flat portrayal may be laid at the feet of subconscious stereotyping.

Even if one accepts that *The Great Wall* is meant to be an inversion of the white saviour trope, the immediacy of the reaction against Damon's casting is reflective of the fact that a white lead in an Asian context is a tiresomely familiar pattern that audiences are increasingly unwilling to accept. Commentary against the "whitewashing" of characters is growing, though its informal existence online – often in the form of twitter posts and brief opinion pieces – may cause it to be dismissed, unlike academic criticism, which carries with it a veneer of respectability. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to note that the *volume* of voices making themselves heard is increasing. With this increase in volume, it may be possible that film-makers begin to listen, and to take chances on films that non-stereotypically depict lives other than that of white men.

It may be argued that it is not stories about white men that make the most money, but rather that those stories that made the most money did so because they were good *stories*, and that their white male leads were incidental to their success. This being the case, if the culture industry takes a chance on placing marginalised characters as leads in good stories – and accepts the occasional failure as it does the occasional failure of works headed by white male leads – it may be possible for representation to organically grow thence. This is what actress Constance Wu argues in a post on Twitter where she criticises Matt Damon's leading role in *The Great Wall*: "Think only a huge movie star can sell a movie? That has NEVER been a total guarantee. [...] If white actors are forgiven for having a box office failure once in a while, why can't a POC [person of colour] sometimes have one?" She argues that without taking that risk, there is no opportunity for the POC-led box office *successes* to showcase their strength (@ConstanceWu). Of course, the success of recent films *Mad Max: Fury Road* (starring a female lead who is supported by the male lead and a largely female supporting cast) and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (starring a female lead and a black male lead) demonstrates that taking these risks can prove to be lucrative. The former earned ten Academy Award nominations and won six of them,

pulling over USD\$378,500,000 worldwide (Mad Max, Box Office Mojo). It has received near-universal praise from both professional and amateur online critics for its extravagant stunts, storyline, and action sequences, which makes clear that this was a winning story first and foremost. That it is a largely female-led film only enhances its appeal, as it places women in roles that would appear to be “types,” only to have them break free of those types. Though the female lead is white, she is also physically disabled and therefore represents another marginalised group that rarely sees such a powerful portrayal on film. In addition, two of the major supporting characters (Toast the Knowing and Cheedo the Fragile) are women of colour who survive to the end of the film – rare, for people of colour in such films. The film might have also performed well with white male leads, but the female presence in the film proves that its success is a function of how well its story is presented, rather than the presence of male leads¹.

Star Wars: The Force Awakens has received similar critical acclaim, but outperforms *Mad Max: Fury Road* in terms of revenue earned. *The Force Awakens* has earned over USD\$936,600,000 in the US and Canada (Star Wars, Box Office Mojo), which makes it the only film to have ever crossed the nine hundred million mark, beating the previous record of USD\$760.5 million (held by *Avatar*) in only twenty days (Brevet). Worldwide, *The Force Awakens* has earned more than two billion dollars, placing it with only two other films (*Avatar* and *Titanic*) that have achieved the same feat, proving that a film led by a woman and a black male can perform at least as well as a story about a messianic white man saving aliens. Given the existence of these films – and of equally successful non-male-focused children’s films such as *Frozen* (with its focus on sisterhood) and *Inside Out* (with its focus on a young girl’s emotions) – it is evident that at least some portions of Hollywood are willing to take risks in deviating from the standard formula. Their performance may well be the incentive needed for more segments of Hollywood and other film makers to do the same, and to place characters from marginalised groups in non-stereotypical roles. In doing so, they enhance the imaginative landscapes of all their viewers, regardless of

¹ Though *Mad Max* does well in portraying some marginalised groups (those with physical disabilities, abuse survivors), it is also important to note that many critics have noted it could do better in terms of portraying race. Toast and Cheedo’s significance should not be dismissed, but the film is otherwise notably white.

their position in the societal hierarchy. Viewers become aware of marginalised characters as being more than their stereotype, and unconsciously begin to apply that awareness to their real-life social interactions. If they are not from the marginalised group, they lose their fear and gain empathy; if they are, they see positive role models for themselves and realise that they can be more.

Wendell Bernard Britt Jr writes of this phenomenon when he talks about the importance of having a black man star in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. He writes that

[b]lack people in America, in a very real sense, have only recently achieved any reasonable semblance of personhood. To write an authentic story about a black person up until the 20th century would be as pointless as writing a story about a mop, or some other object. /To that end, the only space in the white imagination for black people are in roles of subservience. (“Whose Fantasy? Who’s Fantasy?”)

Black people began to achieve personhood when slavery ended – but it is an on-going process, because racism did not end at that same moment. Black characters have begun to appear in stories – but their mere existence is insufficient, for they still largely exist only in “roles of subservience” that hark back to the days of slavery. Films like *The Force Awakens* demand an imaginative reconstruction of what being black means. The necessity of this demand is evident in the way some viewers react to the possibility of a sympathetic and important black character. A vocal minority decried the casting of John Boyega as a Stormtrooper in *The Force Awakens* from the moment the trailer was released. In a similar vein, the casting of a black actress as Rue from *The Hunger Games* was denounced by some. “In a rush to preserve the dogmatic whiteness of fantasy,” Britt Jr writes, readers ignored descriptions in the books of Rue’s blackness “and even more disturbingly, assumed and demanded that sympathetic characters were white.” This is the culture of white supremacy, which in the current landscape is not dominated by overt racism as manifested, for example, in public KKK marches. The most prevalent form that notions of white supremacy take now is the insidious perception that the default is white; the relatable is white; the good is white; and all else is incidental and subservient to whiteness. At play here is the re-mapping of stereotypes that Berinsky and Mendelberg talk about. Racist

stereotypes are (generally) rejected by society, but that means that those stereotypes become mapped onto other ideas to provide a “legitimate” reason for unconscious racial bias. In this case, rather than an overt rejection of blackness, the problem is that whiteness is seen as the ideal of sympathy. Rue is meant to be sympathetic, but is depicted to be black, which interferes with the mental association. Her blackness makes her less likeable and she is therefore rejected – she is perceived to be more true to her character (that is, a sympathetic one) if she is white.

Britt Jr further writes that

[t]he deficiency of imagination in American films today can be summed up as mainly a problem of representation. Art imitates life and yet time and time again, an overwhelming majority of films created have white protagonists. When America thinks of an idealized version of itself, that vision has been and is always a white one, specifically a white male. It is impossible to write an authentic black hero if one’s only exposure, in literature, to black characters is one of subservience. (Britt Jr)

In this statement lie echoes of the question of art’s representative role. Is it, as has been previously discussed, to represent the object-as-is, or the represented-object? Britt Jr suggests that the problem is that the “difference” that Young advocates already exists in the current biased state of affairs, whereby artistic representations skew heavily towards a particular (white male) perception. For instance, studies have found that in 2013, only 25.3% of lead roles in Hollywood films went to women though they make up 51% of the population, and minority races took anywhere between 16.7% to 25.9% of lead roles though they form 37.4% of the U.S. population (Hunt and Ramón 9; Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper 1). Even within minority representations, male characters still consistently outnumber female characters (Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper 5). Certain groups such as Latinos are particularly under-represented even in comparison to other minorities, especially considering that Latinos purchase a disproportionately large 25% of US film tickets (DiPalma). In addition, representation behind the camera is also uneven; for instance, out of 107 directors across 100 films, only 7 were black – of whom two appeared twice, leaving only five black directors in total. None of those were women. This is important because “[f]ilms without a Black director were responsible for casting Black

characters in 10.8% of speaking parts. Black directors, conversely, cast Black characters in 46% of all of the speaking roles” (Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper 2). Real-world representation and on-screen representation are thus irrevocably tied; those in positions of power, even if unconsciously, enforce that standard of the white male while those who are disenfranchised continue to claw for representation. It is evident that marginalised groups, especially those with intersecting biases to battle, are still under-represented on screen. As Britt Jr puts it, the America that lives in the minds of Americans is white. If that is to change to reflect lived reality, then literature and the arts must first change what is possible in the imaginations of Americans, and do so by offering varied representations on the unconscious ideal.

The aforementioned films demonstrate specific examples of how diversity can be a box-office success. This is also true when studying general trends in film and television. Hunt and Ramón find that

median global box office peaked in 2013 for the 28 films with casts that were from 21 percent to 30 percent minority (\$143.3 million)[...] median worldwide box office was only \$53.2 million for the 50 films with casts that were 10 percent minority or less in 2013. /Meanwhile, for 2012, median worldwide box office was actually highest for the 15 films with casts that were from 31 percent to 40 percent minority (\$130.5 million), the cast diversity interval that contains the minority share of the U.S. population. [...] Note that the median global box office was only \$50.7 million for the 64 films with casts that were 10 percent minority or less in 2012. (Hunt and Ramón 47-48)

The pattern also holds true when studying television, across various genres and subsets of such productions such as reality television and cable scripted shows. In addition, shows with diverse casts and writing corps fared the best in terms of ratings (Hunt and Ramón 48-52), proving that as with film, diversity both on-screen and behind the cameras is important both in terms of representation for marginalised groups, and in terms of the bottom line for the industry. These figures make it apparent that contrary to commonly-held belief, diversity can in fact be lucrative, and thus offer hope that the industry may shift towards more equal representation.

This is significant because, as previously argued, popular media has the capacity to influence the public subconscious at least partially. True understanding and empathy for marginalised groups may only come from studying the real-life impact of prejudices on these groups; however, popular media and literature can provide a point of access for those who may be uninterested in, or unable to access, scholarly work on these issues. However, the pervasiveness of popular culture in the modern age means that most people will be exposed in some degree to the messages it carries; popular media may therefore be the way forward in creating additional volume to the available non-stereotypical material, and thereby changing public mind-sets about certain prejudices.

For this reason, I chose to place *The Waystation* in a science fiction setting, with my main characters having unnatural powers. Rather than focusing on the powers themselves, however, the story is concerned with how being different sets these characters apart from society, and how they struggle with that distance and its impact on their perceptions of self. *The Waystation* may only be a single story, but I hope that its questioning of the ways in which prejudices impact people, and the ways in which people react to that impact, becomes one more drop in a tide of change.

The Waystation

Overview

The world of *The Waystation* is a post-apocalyptic one, though one that has recovered from that apocalypse and begun anew with functioning civilisations. This new world order, however, still carries with it strains of prejudice and discrimination, the manifestation of which is familiar even if the targets are ostensibly unlike any real-world ones. The people called Resonants have unnatural abilities that allows them to see the world in a different way and that sets them apart from the rest of the population. They are made to get facial tattoos to serve as an immediate identifier of their status, branding them as “other” in the eyes of the populace, and creating a distance that must be actively worked against in order to be breached.

Each of the cities in this world is self-sufficient and almost entirely closed off from outside influence, the main exception being the caravans that pass through from time to time, largely carrying goods and news. Those people who travel between cities in search of work tend to be of a poorer class, with the wealthier citizens deeming such travel as beneath them since it is a difficult affair. To facilitate such travel, small rest stations called Waystations have been built along certain routes where caravans may take a brief rest and restock. The majority of the story revolves around one such Waystation and the city of Maraoma, and tracks the main character Len’s journey of questioning as she seeks to reconcile herself with the past she has been running away from in order to move forward into her future.

Key Concepts

A major theme in *The Waystation* is that of silence and communication, and the ways in which they do not function as linearly or obviously as one might expect. The story begins with Len’s voluntary mutism as a form of protest against her voice having been ignored in her younger days, when she tried but failed to resist the experimentation done on her. This silence comes to an end when Len realises that she wants to leave the Waystation and go to Maraoma, as if she has also realised that she needs a new strategy to deal with this new part of her life. As the story continues, she

begins to reach out to others and to fight through the paralysing fears of her childhood, culminating in her literal destruction of her prison and figurative destruction of the fears that once kept her locked in place.

The delineation seems clear: when Len finds her voice again, she finds that she has more power than she thought she did. When she is able to talk to others, she takes back her autonomy. However, this turns out to be a simplistic reduction of events. There are other considerations which complicate matters: being able to talk as a child did not grant her autonomy; even when she wasn't speaking, she was still able to communicate clearly through other means; being able to speak does not mean that one *will*, for other factors may get in the way of clear communication. For instance, in Chapter 11, Len encounters difficulty with a worker who displays discomfort at the fact that she is a Resonant. Though he initially seems to do his work nonetheless, it is soon discovered that he omitted a number of key explanations that Len should have received. In the face of his subtle but clear disapproval of her, Len shuts down instinctively. She speaks to him as necessary, but cannot bring herself to speak up regarding his behaviour; it's Eira who has to speak on her behalf instead. Similarly, in Chapter 15, Len cannot speak at all when faced with her kidnapper – the same man responsible for her childhood trauma. Even more so than with the previous worker, she shuts down. She cannot find a single word to say to him, because his very presence brings up the old traumas she suffered again. Len may have decided that her silence was a protest against others, but in this moment it becomes clear that it is also a traumatic stress reaction.

Len's blinkered view of her silence is a product of her youth and hurt – she tries to reclaim an involuntary reaction (not speaking up about what Raj was doing) by pushing it to the maximum and calling it a form of protest (not speaking at all). Starting from Eira's observation that Len has managed to make herself known despite her self-imposed silence, Len comes to realise that the ability to communicate is unrelated to the ability to speak. Words can obfuscate as much as they reveal, and silence may be both quieter and louder than she thought.

This concept of communication and miscommunication runs through Len's relationships, most evidently with her father. Len believes that her father was the orchestrator of the experiments that so traumatised her, and hates him for putting

her in that position. But memory is a fickle thing to begin with, and trauma can render it even more unreliable – as Len learns in the course of the story, her father having placed her in a position to be hurt may have been an accident rather than the deliberate act she had believed it to be. Reinvestigating her past turns up less culpability on his part than she had thought there was, and Len struggles with whether she should let go of her hatred for him.

Her mother's letters to her at the Waystation reveal enough to start Len questioning her memory of what had happened, but her mother's death means that the only place left to find answers is with her father. He proves to have as contentious a relationship with communication as Len has – she remembers him as a private man who shuns crowds and prefers to keep his thoughts to himself (137). However, it becomes clear that in their time apart, he has stepped up to become a public figure: she watches a video of him giving a speech for the RAIE and realises that he is well-accustomed to it (136-137). In fact, his first appearance in the form of the letter he sent Len sets the tone for this when he states that he “broke his silence” when he realised that he needed to take a stand for Resonant rights (49). It also makes the first mention that he has opened up similarly in his private life when he makes it clear that he wants to be as open and honest with her as her mother had been (50). This is later corroborated at his first face-to-face meeting with Len, when he tries to answer her as honestly as he can.

By this point, Len has already come to realise that in all likelihood, her father truly had not known about what Raj had been doing and has begun to let go of her resentment towards him. In fact, she realises that her determination to hold on to her silence may have hurt her – in refusing to read the letters her mother sent, she denied herself this clarity. In this moment, she thinks that despite naming herself Silence, “she wasn't any better at listening... it was something you had to work at, and if you gave up, that was it” (145). An addendum to this that she may not consciously realise is that the other person also needs to be listening. Len spends much of the first half of the book spinning in circles with her unanswered questions, but despite her newfound resolution to tackle them, she cannot do it alone. It takes reaching out to her father – and finding his hand reaching back – for her to start putting together the pieces. Both silence and words can be used to clarify or obfuscate, but regardless

of which method is used, it is only when a genuine attempt at communication is made on both sides that meaning can be found; nothing can come of it if only one person makes the attempt.

In other words, those who are prejudiced must be able to take that first step forward to acknowledge their prejudice before any change can be wrought. Unthinking stereotypes and prejudice have to be actively challenged before they can be overturned.

The ability to recognise that nothing is static is the first step towards growth, both individually and as a collective. Eira shares both her Resonance and worldview that change is normal with Len, catalysing this realisation in her and allowing her to relook her life with fresh perspective. In a related manner, names and their role in the formation of identity play a part in the lives of the characters. Those who work at a Waystation take on new names that are aligned with their predominant duties, thus redefining themselves through their work. Len renames herself on her arrival at the Waystation, and in so doing sheds her past self. This recreation is not without flaws; by definition it describes only a narrow part of her being, without taking into account the fullness of her life. However, in renaming herself she also acknowledges that she has entered a new phase of her life. She may have a complex relationship with the concept of silence, but the name itself in time becomes a reminder to listen. By the time she returns to Maraoma, she finds her given name of Sridevi ill-fitting not because she has completely rejected the person she was, but because she is coming to terms with herself as she is. The significance of a name is as mutable as identity itself is. Len's key lesson throughout the novel, as symbolised through her naming and renaming, is that identity is no less valid for being an ever-changing thing.

This process of change and the ways in which it can impact people is also paralleled in the presentation of the Waystation and the world in general. The story begins at the Waystation, transits into a journey, and ends in the city of Maraoma. Len arrives at the Waystation in her childhood, fresh from a trauma that has gone unaddressed, and consequently uses the Waystation as a hiding place. Though it provides some comforting distance from her trauma, it also becomes a trap that holds her in place, preventing her from seeing or seeking anything different. Eira's arrival is a catalyst that incites Len to reinvestigate her past through the thus-far untouched

letters her mother had sent, which in turn results in her decision to return to Maraoma in search of answers. In contrast to the Waystation, Maraoma's city seems vast and unpredictable, forcing Len's worldview to expand from the confining limits of the Waystation.

As with the theme of communication, however, such neat delineation proves to be too simplistic: the Waystation is also a place of learning and healing for Len, while Maraoma proves to be close-minded and trapped by insularity. Growth and change need a goal to strive towards in order to be productive, and it is only on choosing to leave the Waystation that Len finds forward momentum in her life. The journey between the Waystation and Maraoma is the beginning of that movement forward for her, as she explores the kind of connections to others that she has denied herself during her time at the Waystation. This application of theoretical knowledge – of social interaction and of allowing oneself to be influenced and changed by one's experiences – starts in the course of that journey, and culminates in her realisation that Maraoma is also too limiting and therefore unsuitable for her. She compares the city to a series of Waystations set next to each other (173), and in so doing draws the connection to neither being better or worse than the other; what is important is each place's willingness to investigate new ideas and be open to change. Maraoma might be bigger and more advanced, but it is closed off from other cities. The Waystation has a steady flow of travellers from different regions that pass through it, but Len has always shut herself away from them. Throughout the course of the story, she gains an understanding of what each of these can do for her, and determines to find a place for herself where she can learn, grow, and change without being confined by the perceptions of others – and without forcing herself to fit a mould that she has grown out of.

Identity

In *The Waystation*, Resonants are encouraged to hold fast to what they believe is true about themselves. "Know yourself" is the mantra that Len clings to, and her silence is in equal parts borne of anger at her voice going unheard, as well as fear that communication might open the way for what she knows of herself to be changed. Above all else, she does not wish to be changed. Narratively, she is afraid of losing

herself to her Resonance and dying, and metaphorically, she is afraid of who she will become if she accepts alterations to her perception of herself. She clings desperately to her knowledge that her father saw her only as an experiment, and that her parents did not care about her as a person. What she does not realise, of course, is that changes will happen despite her best efforts. The books she trades with caravans; the stories she overhears even despite her lack of participation; her non-verbal communication and upkeep of her journal; these all combine to affect her in precisely the ways she does her best to hold off at the start of the story. What she believes to be an unchanging truth becomes fraught with uncertainty. Eira serves as a catalyst for her to realise that her efforts to preserve the status quo have been in vain, but the changes have been building up even prior to Eira's arrival. As a child, Len typescasts herself and then does not realise that she can be more than that single story she has created; as an adult, she finally learns to recognise more in herself, even if others do not.

Len embodies three categories that are often stereotyped in varying ways depending on the social environment of the reader: she is a woman of colour who suffers from depression and PTSD. She is also the main character of the story. None of these are categories that preclude her from being important, or that forbid her from being the main character – the way she is perceived may inform her behaviour, but does not require her to be in a supporting role. Borrowing from Ursula LeGuin's technique in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, this story similarly hides many of these facets of Len's existence until later in the story. Her identity as a woman is at once clear, but her struggles with mental illness are initially only addressed obliquely through her physical symptoms; it is not until the second interlude when Doc writes to Len's father that we learn that Len suffers from panic attacks. Doc outright states that Len would benefit from speaking to a professional, making it clear that Len's life is affected by her illness. Similarly, it is not until the third interlude, when Len's father refers to his daughter as "Sridevi" instead of "Len" that Len's ethnicity becomes apparent. The story might focus on Len's search for her identity, but these categories through which others might stereotype her prove to be tangential to the question of who she is as a person. They inform her actions, but are not the totality of them.

It is still true, however, that stereotyping influences Len, especially in the way others perceive her. At the Waystation, Len is part of a tiny social group that must come together for the sake of survival. One person's talents alone are insufficient, and therefore everyone ought to pitch in to help. Practically speaking, however, Doc eschews most of the menial labour and demands a degree of deference. It might appear as if this is a subversion of the stereotype that men are natural leaders, and women are more passive. However, the truth emerges when considering Len's view of Doc as being more important in the eyes of society. This is why Doc gets better pay than her colleagues, and her position is considered to be voluntary, unlike the Resonants who are compelled to go to the Waystations if their abilities are not yet under control (or, as we later find out, to live in separate housing segregated from the rest of the population in Maraoma). Doc is of a higher class and better social position than Len or Manny, and in this particular intersection of class and gender, class wins out. Manny and Len both defer to her, if more obviously in Len's case: Len serves her meals to her and so on, whereas Manny's deference largely takes the form of an unwillingness to stand up to her even when he disagrees with her. He tries to divert uncomfortable conversations, but is never quite able to outright challenge her. Len fails to even do that much, though her internal monologue reveals that she does resent Doc's occasional high-handedness. Though Doc proves to have been looking out for her, and though Len appreciates Doc's assistance with her panic attacks and insistence on her education and so on, the class-based gulf between them is still clear. Unconscious stereotyping still influences their interactions with each other, and Len falls into a pattern of passivity that she never fully manages to escape until Eira's arrival catalyses change in her life.

When Len leaves the Waystation, she makes a conscious decision to step outside of that typical pattern of passivity. The trip to Maraoma is marked by a series of firsts for her – her first time speaking in years, her first time actively interacting with strangers, her first time touching someone. She tries to get past the part of her mind that tries to lock her into the stereotypical patterns that she's followed all this time, and in so doing begins to thoroughly question the degree to which they impact her, and whether it is an impact she accepts or not. Being quiet or passive is not in and of itself a bad thing, but being forced into that position against her will is

something she rejects. When she is kidnapped in the Chapter 14, she recognises the difference between being held there and being isolated at the Waystation (151): the latter was at least partially her choice, and leaving was also her choice. The former only makes her furious, because she knows that her life *is* her choice, and after her soul-searching to this point, she knows that she will not give up control over it to anyone else. She still prefers anonymity and quiet, as is evident when she offers to make Eira the leader of the new city she envisions, so that she can work in the background. However, this bid for anonymity is by choice. This is the lesson that Len learns throughout the course of the story: that though she may be unable to do anything about how others perceive her, she has a choice about what she chooses to do with herself.

Of course, she does also manage to make a dent in the perceptions of others when she rescues herself from her kidnappers. She uses the very thing that sets her apart, her Resonance, to literally destroy what would confine her. It is much harder to escape the pernicious influence of stereotypes in society, however, and Len's wholesale destruction of her prison parallels her mother's suggestion that if they cannot change things, they should burn it all to the ground. The RAIE modifies this sentiment into the idea that education will help to reduce negative attitudes towards stereotypes, but as is evident through the real-world research described previously in this essay, this may have limited success. Len further modifies her mother's sentiment at the end of the story when she decides to build a new city altogether. It is still an imperfect solution, since people will bring their unconscious biases with them – however, having to assist in building and sustaining a new city throws the potential new citizens into the same position that Len and Manny were in at the Waystation. A scenario in which neighbourly assistance is crucial to survival does not allow (in an ideal world) for stereotypes to be sustained indefinitely. In place of the authoritative Doc, Len and Eira will be overseeing the city, and as they are both aware of and consciously fighting stereotypes about themselves, it seems likely that they will encourage the new citizens to build the city around the same principles. This is the ideal that Len determines to work towards. Early in the story, Eira comments that Len's destructive Resonance allows for the possibility of reconstruction, and it is this same possibility that is mirrored in Len's decision to create a new city. Whether either

approach works, and what benefits and flaws each might carry, is yet to be seen, but striving towards that ideal despite the possibility of failure is still key.

Besides Len, the other characters whose Resonances are explicitly revealed are Eira and Manny, and each of their Resonances also reflect their characters and the way they interact with the world, in the same way that Len's does. Manny's Resonance seeks damage, and in personality, he wants to try and fix things. Though his role is minor, it reflects two things: that not everything broken is damaged, and that not everything damaged can be fixed. He is patient with Len and never pushes her boundaries, but that alone is not enough to help her heal from her emotional trauma. She has to choose to push through on her own for that to happen. All he is capable of is providing her with a safe shelter until she is ready to do so. And when she does, she discovers that though parts of her might have broken from her past experiences, she is not so broken as to be irrevocably damaged. She still has within herself the potential to heal.

Though Len's trauma and the way it impacts her Resonance is obvious, Manny and Eira are also unconsciously restricted in the way they used their Resonances. In fact, Len's question to Manny about how he found Eira guides him into realising that he may be able to sense more with his Resonance than he thought he could – that he was limiting himself through his expectations, and that he needs to expand his understanding of the world in order for his potential to unfurl. That Manny *has* learned something new about his Resonance after that is confirmed at the end of the story. There is therefore also the implicit possibility that the same is true of all Resonants, and all people; that we are only limited by what we think possible. Eira's issues with her Resonance function similarly; as Len's foil, her Resonance is tied to water and creation. She believes that water is the only thing she can create, because she thinks that her Resonance must be similar to her mother, who could pull pure water away from pollutants. Even though she is ostensibly more open and flexible than Manny or Len are, her belief ties her down just as Manny's does. Len challenges that belief in her newfound certainty that limitations exist to be broken. The question of whether or not Len is right about Eira's Resonance being capable of more is left unanswered. There are no absolute certainties; she does not get all the answers. Even Raj and Mahesh's final fate is left unanswered. Despite that, Len's confidence at the

end of the story is borne of a willingness to accept and work with all possibilities. Her imaginative consciousness has expanded, and she is no longer bound by what stereotypes say she *ought* to be.

Len's father acts in similar fashion when he attempts to build machines that can replicate Resonance. In doing so, he seeks to dissociate individuals from their abilities, so that the one is not dependent on or viewed solely through the lens of the other. This allows Resonants to be viewed as people first, rather than as their abilities. His work, in other words, is an attempt to excise the stereotype from the person and therefore force the public consciousness to pay attention to other aspects of the Resonants' being – something that even Resonants are guilty of failing to do, as when Manny focuses solely on the utility (or lack thereof) of his Resonance. This does depend on society not finding some other prejudice to map the old one onto, which as discussed earlier, can and has happened in real-world situations. In conjunction with education, however, it is a plausible alternative from Len's rather more dramatic solution, which may be impractical in a real-world context. His solution is a reminder that Resonance is only one facet of a person, and that it does not entail their whole being – just as Len's ethnicity and trauma and so on are only parts of her, and do not define her. Identity is a fluid concept that stereotypes fail to get a clear grasp on, and the process of pulling apart and breaking down different parts of identity paradoxically makes that clear. It is not something that can be simplistically reduced to its components; it is the very interconnectedness and breadth of her ability that makes it so hard for Len's father to try and replicate it.

Conclusion

Raj and Mahesh are an example of what can happen when prejudice reaches an extreme. They view Resonants as less than human; in the fourth interlude, Raj refers to Len as “subject,” “specimen,” or simply “it” in a clear indication of this dehumanisation. This view is inculcated in them in order to prevent empathy and to allow them to act as they will. It is something that has happened in real-world situations – there are echoes of Nazi Germany in the implied medical experimentation, and Alatas’ criticism of colonial scholarship also finds its parallel here. Along a similar vein, Chimamanda Adichie comments

[H]ere is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Locke, who sailed to west Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as “beasts who have no houses,” he writes, “They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts.” Now, I’ve laughed every time I’ve read this. And one must admire the imagination of John Locke. But what is important about his writing is that it represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West: a tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness. (“The Danger of a Single Story”)

Textbooks and treatises: these often purport to contain factual representations of the object-as-is, but the biases – both conscious and subconscious – of their authors must be taken into consideration as well. Scholarly work is often regarded as automatically more trustworthy and logical than works of fiction, due to the perception that it must always present the facts dispassionately. Such works therefore hold great power when it comes to creating and reiterating a single story of a particular community to those outside that community. But it is impossible to divorce oneself entirely from one’s beliefs, and so it is essential to read even scholarly works with a discerning eye.

It may be possible, however, to combat that single story through popular media, even if it seems at first glance that such literature would be viewed more sceptically, and its biases immediately identified and possibly ignored. Presenting a wider range of possibilities can still create the chance to evaluate other works in

comparison. With enough volume – and variation within that volume – in the presentation of any given community, stereotyped portrayals become more obvious when they appear, and audiences begin to recognise that stereotypes are not the entirety of that community.

As has been previously discussed, stereotypes may be benign and are in fact a means through which we process and understand the world. They may not in and of themselves be harmful, save for when they lead to prejudice and discrimination – however, one must be wary of arriving at the latter two. It is possible for prejudice to be subconsciously fomented due to the social environment one is surrounded by. Being aware of that possibility and actively working to counter it is hence the best means through which we can relate to those not in our shared social groups. Resonance, though a fantastic invention, provides a metaphor through which we may critically examine the more realistic issues of discrimination along the lines of gender, ethnicity, and mental illness that Len faces – and through her, the real-world consequences and impact of prejudice on those who suffer it.

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