THE WAKING WORLD

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“And I asked myself about the present: how wide it was,
how deep it was, how much was mine to keep.”

-Slaughterhouse Five, Kurt Vonnegut

00. PROLOGUE – Eiji

Sino-Korean Colony of Nippon

We’re restarting civilization. What do we keep?

Eiji blinks and the Blue unfurls before her. It falls as a semi-transparent screen over her vision, lighting up with rows of text and hundreds of scrolling images in answer to the message board question: Renaissance paintings, coffee pots and cookbooks, Mesozoic dig sites, botanical encyclopedias. The net feed follows her thoughts -- closing pages she ignores after a glance and moving others that catch her interest but need to be looked over later – all thanks to the optic implant everyone in the factory-state of Nippon had been retrofitted with during the war.

Lying awake in bed, weak daylight breaching the window just beyond the aquamarine interface, Eiji considers contributing to the first board for the hell of it. She thinks of the wagashi sweets she distantly remembers from childhood, smuggled through the door by neighbors, eaten like animals in a burrow, quick and hidden. Practical things pass through her mind: Servers and coolant tanks. Toilet paper. Penicillin. She thinks of her true answer and has to look away. Nobody wants to be reminded of the inevitable. Not everything on planet Earth is going to make it to the new world.
Eiji sits in bed and thinks about turning on the audio in the Blue. The neural shift is subtle and instant. *Kuo*, she thinks and a bright run of eighth notes indicates the connecting call. “You there?” she asks hoarsely. The English is clunky when her tongue works around the rough consonants.

Kuo coughs and it comes in loud and clear, closer than any vibration in Eiji’s ear canal, sounding bright as her own thoughts. She says, “Hey, yeah. Systems ready on this end but we’re in for a hell of a wait. Everyone’s antsy.” Another cough resonates. “Morning,” she adds.

“Mm,” Eiji grunts. She pushes off her blankets and gets to her feet. Running her hands through her long hair she encounters tangles. She leaves them be and pushes what she can out of her face. When she stretches something in her back pops and she grimaces. Lately she’s taken to fidgeting with a strange discomfort in her muscles, restless and awkward. Eiji’s mother, all of five feet, assures her it’s growing pains. Eiji’s father asks if it’s stress. At fifteen, Eiji is reasonably sure both answers are correct and she resents both equally. The everyday rhythms of life are a hindrance when they make themselves known, interfering with work. “Give me a sec. Gotta get in place.”

“Hurry up. Jesus. Been waiting for you for two hours.”

Under the lip of Eiji’s nightstand, against the smooth slide of paint, is a small switch. Eiji catches her finger against it and a panel in the wall next to her bed gives, depressing inward. The saferoom was built pre-war, all concrete and cables. One step into the darkness and the overhead lights begin to flicker and buzz. The room was once stocked with rations and firearms, but both were taken in the raids after the war. It was Eiji who filled the room again with junkyard scraps and ancient consoles and flatscreens,
tech that shouldn’t have survived their resurrection at her hands. No one uses the bulky hardware anymore, not now that the Blue had gone neural, but Eiji likes the way the relics fill the room and give her hands something to do while she works out the codes in her head.

Sino-Korea put a lockdown on international communications outside of government facilities, thinking it would tamp down on the panic if no one knew what other countries were doing to prep for the First Wave. Eiji had gotten through those blocks easily enough. Her parents had allowed her into the Blue at age four, supervising her every move, shadow-watching, unlocking digital doors to children’s sites. Eventually their attentions waned and by age six Eiji was exploring the make-up of sites and programs, taking apart settings and building from the ground up. By seven she was hacking her parents’ personal accounts for wider access. Teachers started expressing concern when Eiji refused to play on the Blue with other children during assigned school hours. “She needs to learn how to interact,” they would stress, wringing their hands. “This is the first step to true communication for her.”

Maybe if the Tatsuyamas had listened Eiji wouldn’t be here, running her own global surveillance network from a safesroom before dawn. “Alright,” Eiji says, gliding around the room on a rolling chair, turning on monitors, her server and coolant tank. “Here we go.”

Maybe if her parents had cut her connection from the start, Eiji would have a better grasp on small talk and how to remain patient during long-winded anecdotes and other human social functions. Had they done either of these things, though, there would be no way the Tatsuyamas would have even a fraction of a hope of getting off-planet with
the rest of the fleeing ships. Humanity’s remaining span is a quickly ticking clock and Eiji does not want to die.

Nine screens piled on top of each other boot up in sync. Reaching for the dusty keyboard, Eiji opens the only program on the center monitor. Kuo nags, “Just connect already, you don’t need fifteen million –”

“But I do.”

“I have things to do so hurry your ass.”

“Not without my instructions you don’t.” The receiver kicks in and the world is, for the briefest of seconds, a shift of colors and motion as the feeds in the Blue transplant themselves onto the physical monitors. Images blank out like glitches so Eiji can see the room in fits of true blue from the coolant tank and screens and the dark shadows off the concrete walls, rainbow wires knotted, spiraling. The Blue rights itself, re-booting, opening new pages as Eiji’s thoughts settle and catch up to the adjustment. Headlines from the latest news articles scroll by, a devastating mishmash of different languages, then, just as quickly, soundbite messages from Rodney, from Rika, trite conversations. Spread out across so many screens, it’s easier to find Kuo’s feed opening, like looking down a long road, narrow on the horizon. “There you are,” Eiji says. The message boards Kuo reads scroll by in real-time and Eiji watches which text shines out, bolded, underlined, as the informant reads and picks out potential leads and glancing interests.

“Shadows are going nuts with speculation. You get that board I sent you?” Kuo asks.

“You mean the banalities that woke me up? I did. Jerk. How are we doing on that contact in Beirut?”
“Cold. The Saudi launch was a rumor. That contact is moving east. Maybe we can get in with Europe.”

“Doubt it. They’re moving all their forces to Africa for shipbuilding.”

“I read that wasn’t true.”

“Hmm. We’ll check it.”

It’s easier to process the onslaught of morning information with fingers pressed to an actual keyboard. Three long, plastic card tables serve as Eiji’s main office, table legs wobbling beneath the added weight of tower computers and system units. Discarded motherboards heave up like tombstones amidst coils of multi-colored wires held together with twist-ties. Everything is old tech, inefficient and leeching energy like suckling babes, but the optic Blue interface is still a prototype and can only hold so much information in a user’s visual field. Eiji needs the space to process the multitudes of information she prefers to work with at a time.

“You know,” Kuo says. Her feed is full of launch announcements, pictures of angry protestors and smiling politicians. “It’s not like we’re going to have much left to trade for seats.”

Eiji does know. Their best bet on financial backing had gone off the grid two weeks prior. “Just keep trying. I wanna know if there’s going to be any clean-up on launch stuff or if anyone’s leaving the dregs some materials to tinker with when they’re done.”

“I know, I know.”

At fifteen, Eiji is a digger. The Blue is the worldwide playground and communications network, or at least it was before the war, after which connectivity
became spottier, more blackouts started appearing in information sources. Kuo and a network of smalltime hackers gather information that takes time and patience to access, checking facts and sending it through. It’s Eiji who puts the pieces together and is doing her best to find a way around the launch restrictions, looking for weak links to exploit for seats, trying to find blueprints that maybe some black market can use for rogue crafts, however farfetched. None of it has yielded much so far. She won’t admit she is losing help.

Eiji keeps an eye on Kuo’s and several other informants’ feeds with occasional darting glances. “Any warnings on your end last night?” she asks. She’s already lost contact with four-fifths of her workers. Kuo is the only one left who reports in daily.

“Fire broke out around three last night, couple blocks over,” Kuo says. “The shelter or something. Guess some people thought if they couldn’t get people to protest with them then nobody gets nice things. Maybe they thought someone at the launch pad would pay attention and take pity. I don’t know.”

“That sucks,” Eiji says, trying for heartfelt, coming off distracted.

“Titanic 2.0,” Kuo says. “Not enough lifeboats. No pressure but you don’t find something quick and I’m out of this deal. Gonna find somewhere to hole up with the family and stay safe.”

Eiji doesn’t stop typing. She nods to nobody. She knew something like this would be brought up sooner or later. She had been hoping for much later. “Do what you gotta do,” she says, and starts reading an editorial written by some big protest leader out Stateside.
It’s been a mere three years since world war had broken out and then abruptly ended with the remaining fighters engaging in an all-out, every-man-for-himself sprint off-planet to the newly erected finish line: the Terra colonies some several ten thousands light years away. Earth is no longer a sustainable habitat with almost 98% of the oceans rendered toxic by radiotrophic fungi initially used to clean up the nuclear waste from the war. The consequences had become catastrophic, taking a toll on the health of large sections of the population near the water and doing even more damage ecologically.

Everyone had been using the newly engineered fungi to try to make the planet cleaner and safer, that had been the real irony. It was the fungi killing off all sea life, contaminating the waters and the precipitation cycle, dispersing spores of deadly mycotoxins that no one knew how to contain on such a large scale. The quarantines failed. The economy was still a wreck. World leaders gathered for a conference had an easy out from dealing with any of it: They launched. They left the dying Earth behind, including most of the population, the “unnecessary.”

Kuo sighs. “I’m fucking tired. What do you got for me today, what am I looking for? Launch resources? Engineer manifestos? The Golden Fleece?” Eiji can hear children asking something in the background and a man’s voice following, close enough to hear his exact chatter back at the kids. “And what kind of time frame are we talking here?” Kuo asks tiredly. Eiji knows it’s hard on Kuo with everyone else dropping out.

“I don’t know but –”

“Jesus. That is all you say anymore so can you just say there’s nothing to look for anymore? Can you say we’re done and stop getting my hopes up? I mean, God, look at these idiots.”
Eiji glances at the mounting absurdities of conversation discussing what parts of all of Earth’s cultures are worth salvaging in the new world: bacon-wrapped asparagus, eighteen different mascara brands, democracy, porn. “We’re not done yet. Just calm down. What’s wrong?”

Kuo lets out a disgruntled noise. “I told you, the goddamn shelter burned down.”

“So I heard. From you.”

“Did you know we’re out of rations? Out. No pick-up in three weeks. The shelter has food but you can only get the food if you’re staying there. We were almost going to stay there last night. My family. Me.”

Eiji glances again at the news articles on one screen, the status updates, the flurry of all-caps comments. Those people are scared. She knows Kuo is scared but that’s life now. Eiji has been battling near daily panic attacks since the start of the war. Fear doesn’t get the work done. The ticking clock will not stop for anyone to catch their breath. (The thought is darkly funny. *Breath*. Soon no one will be breathing.) This is the part she hates, the giving orders. “But it wasn’t and that’s good. We’ve got the launch in SK to monitor today and I need eyes and passenger lists.”

Kuo’s cough is jarring and dry. The pages from her feed stay at a stand-still. “Are you fucking kidding me?” she asks, very quietly.

“It’s this or nothing,” Eiji says. “Times are shitty for everyone but I think we can do this. You’re in or you’re out.” The cold dismissal bubbles in her blood and she knows she has to wait for it to pass, that she needs the help, that she cannot afford another lost worker.
Back when Eiji had been getting started, Rodney, her unsolicited mentor, had popped in to scold her high turnover of initial helpers. “Empathy!” he stressed when she laid out reasons he shot down as nitpicking. Eiji had seethed and gone dark for six hours, shutting every single one of her systems down on his stupid, grinning, mentor face…only to log back on not long after. She made shallow excavations into files that were always easy to access but ones she would have preferred avoiding all the same. It took all of four minutes to learn that Kuo is Katerina Turner, age thirty-three, married, no criminal record. The woman has a bad cough from what Eiji now suspects to be chronic acid reflux. The prescription for some monthly peptic ulcer medication tipped it off. Eiji laid off the marathon programming sprees and ultimatums but nobody liked getting orders from a girl who had just barely gone through puberty.

“Look,” Eiji says, trying again. “I’m just saying: We’re not trying to read smoke signals from the masses blowing off steam, alright? That matters but so does all the stuff the top of the hierarchy can afford. That’s where the goods are.” She shifts awkwardly in her seat, feet dangling. “I need…your help.” The words don’t fit right. “You do good work. And whatever.”

“And whatever,” Kuo repeats. The feed moves infinitesimally, like an eye twitch, and Eiji is assaulted with sudden raw footage, aerial surveillances, supply trucks, news clips of surging crowds and cardboard boxes upended, broken chainlink. Still bodies in the streets.

It is worse than any verbal accusation. Something devastatingly helpless snaps in Eiji’s core, a break as clean as the two ends of a wishbone. “Fuck you,” she says. If there’s one thing she has learned to appreciate about English, one of two auxiliary
languages between most countries, it has been the sharp edges of each curse word. “Fuck you,” she repeats. Children babble on the other end. “Do not put this on me.”

They flew red once, she and Kuo, during the war, teaming up with other hacktivists to divert food supplies form the hoard being stockpiled in the capital to areas devastated by drought and the overcrowded cities with empty supermarket shelves. They kept track of military movements and the next nuclear strikes to send out civilian warnings across the globe. People were dying. The wrong people were dying, of that Eiji had always been certain. But then whole coastal armies, battalions of ships carrying naval crews, were getting sick, were arriving with no survivors. They had passed through patches of the fungi, the radiotrophic mold sent to clean up the nuclear waste in the deep oceans. Contaminations popped up across the globe in no time. The launches began not long after. Eiji didn’t know who to help, how to help. It didn’t mean she wasn’t helping.

“If you want out, you’re out,” Eiji says and tries to ignore the phantom voice of Rodney in her head, shouting No! C’mon! “But I’ll need you to the end of the day. We need someone with a concrete connection that can get us more than an external camera on the launch.” Eiji sighs. “You’re good at that, always come through, so just do it one last time, alright? Please.”

There is a pause, a soft cough. “Yeah,” Kuo says. “I’ll get it.”

Eiji releases her bitten lip and gets back to browsing the radio chatter on the upcoming launch. It is Sino-Korean’s second ship, scrapped together with the last of their long reach over resources. Eiji had been doing her best to find a weak point in this ship, so close to her own home but –
Kuo’s voice is like a laser, cutting in vivid and piquant through Eiji’s thoughts.

“Assuming this is my last day, I gotta know,” she says.

“What,” Eiji says flatly, not bothering to make it an invitation, a question.

“What do you think you’re going to see that’s different from the rest of the launches?” She asks it with such exasperation and Eiji knows how hard it is to watch ship after ship leaving the whole planet behind, leaving so many people, leaving them behind. She knows.

Eiji is not sure which of them thinks it first. Footage from previous launches rolls by in the Blue, a blur, flashing out like belated control over the thought. It can’t have been her thought process, she decides when her vision resettles. The anomalies weren’t there.

Gliding her way back to the main screens, Eiji pushes off the table edges so hard it hurts her palms. It doesn’t take the edge off her resentment. Truthfully, she hopes there is no difference in today’s launch, that maybe it will help confirm that something is off, that maybe something is wrong. “Get me the contacts,” she says unkindly, “and you get paid.” Overhead the feeds have not changed over what menial, banal restaurant chains, annual vaccines, and sex toys deserve to exist in the unknown world that is to serve as Earth’s new sanctuary. Eiji swipes them from the screen.

Kuo’s feed starts to move again. “Fine.” Eiji watches her work, staring without seeing the individual letters making up each word, the pixels to each blurry image. It would be so easy to crawl back into bed, to let someone else sort this out.
A flash of red lights cuts through the moving interface of the Blue and the duller glow of the coolant tank in the room. Eiji rolls her eyes and shuts off audio in time to hear her mother’s voice through the intercom system connected to the main house.

“I thought we had a deal about eating before school,” her mother says. The Mandarin syllables still tilt weirdly across the newly-learned octaves. Nipponese is strictly forbidden in the colonies. “Get out here, please.” The flashing lights turn off when Meiko Tatsuyama lets go of her end of the intercom.

“Cutting it close for the launch if you’re going to be at school,” Kuo says when Eiji reconnects audio. Her voice is a disorienting rush of English, buoyant, bordering on mocking. Eiji wonders if Kuo’s up for more verbal blows now that she’s been reminded of Eiji’s own age and station in life.

She takes the bait anyway. “You wouldn’t even get in on a launch for genetic diversity, so do you want my help or not?”

There is a long pause. Kuo’s voice comes in quiet and poisonous. “You don’t know everything, you know. You think you do but you are so fucking young.”

With her spine pressed to the seams of her rolling chair, Eiji’s feet dangle a full six inches from the ground. She knows this will be Kuo’s last day. “Work,” she says. “Just get it done and you’re out.” She’ll deal with the loss later.

The red lights flash again and Eiji knows her time is limited before she gets bodily dragged out by Meiko’s equally tiny body. On the old monitors she begins to pull up her library of launch videos. Sino-Korea and North Africa, where most of Western Europe had allocated their resources for a safe escape, were the only big launches so far. About ten thousand bodies to each ship. The news outlets had dubbed the launches the
First Wave. Nobody was talking about the fact that the waves would be limited. That there might not even be a second or third.

Eiji hits the play button. On-screen the very first launch runs smoothly: a Sino-Korean craft lifts off, carrying the president, his cabinet, and a fourth of their military. The ship leaves behind cylindrical columns of smoke, funneling out like pillars of salt, roaring fires that cast off in wisps that float away on the wind. As far as Eiji can tell all of the rocket technology in all recorded launches is nearly identical. She’s seen at least half of the Sino-Korean schematics at this point, drafts and blueprints that meant nothing to her. Nothing wobbles or explodes and all of the launches disappear in a sky too crowded with dark clouds to see the final ascent through the atmosphere. Eiji’s watched these videos a hundred different times and, still, nothing looks suspect about the physical launches.

Fast-forwarding through the footage, Eiji pulls up the data that has been bothering her from the very first launch. The feeds had been pulled live from control towers via the faction of scientists monitoring individual passenger vital statuses. The ship population was already in process of cryopreservation for the long journey ahead, each face visible through the thick windows set in each pill-shaped pod. Eiji watched as the pods began to vibrate, gently at first, until the shaking and rattling grew violent, the ship igniting, blasting up and up and up. She’s marked the anomaly before. It occurs exactly like she remembers.

*There.*

Like always, at the sight of it Eiji’s heart slams against every inch of her skin, hot and painful. It is far from negligible data, of this she is certain: Just as the ship breaks
atmo something shifts in the passenger EEG readings, a sustained change. Eiji doesn’t
know how to describe it, much less how to read it. Earth loses contact with the ship once
it hits lightspeed. It happens time after time, each individual launch, all in ships built by
different countries, launching from separate sites, monitored by separate groups of
scientists and engineers. These kinds of readings were not shown in any of the original
cryo testing data.

The saferoom door opens, spilling in the tangerine flush from Eiji’s bedside lamp.
Her mother stands at the top of the stairs, small and imperious. “I mean it,” she says.
“Let’s go or I get your father to transport all of this…” She gestures. “Stuff back to the
dump. You’re going to be late.”

School isn’t technically school anymore, lacking funding and a probable future on
Earth. All the straw government left in Sino-Korea’s place cares about is the illusion that
life keeps proceeding. As though everyone’s survival matters.

“You know I’ll just get more work done here,” Eiji says, starting her shutdown
sequence anyway.

“Right,” Meiko says dryly. “Work. Playing on your computers all day, wasting our
electricity.” The Mandarin comes out stilted. With each pause Meiko’s tone grows more
hostile, more frustrated.

They both emerge in Eiji’s bedroom. Without the overlay of the Blue’s interface,
it is easier to see the soft dolls in winter clothes by the window, the display cases housing
mounted butterflies on the antique cheery wood desk. They are all relics from another
time, a different Nippon, and a different girl.
“There’s things happening out there that they’re not letting in the regular Blue and I know you know it, too,” Eiji says, catching the clothes her mother throws at her.

Meiko was once an obstetrician-gynecologist. She worked odd hours, always on-call, driving to and from the hospital to bring new life into the world. Under Sino-Korean rule she now works at one of the sixty-three Pro-V factories in the colonies, packaging the protein-vitamin rations that get shipped out at the end of every week. She holds out a pair of socks. “An able-bodied adolescent who doesn’t manage to dress herself without her mother’s help every morning due to extreme apathy –”

“It’s not apathy,” Eiji protests, even as she swipes for the socks and sits at the edge of her bed, still in her oversized sleep shirt.

“—does not get a say on what does or does not define work. Or –” She flounders for the word. “Conspiracy,” she spits. Meiko shakes her head, glances at her daughter. “When was the last time you even bathed?”

“It saves on water,” Eiji says automatically. It used to be a ready excuse. Now it’s the convenient truth. Moving her fingers and cracking her knuckles, Eiji runs restlessly through a basic security coding in her mind, thinking back to the video feeds, the EEG anomaly. Another ship will be launching from Sino-Korea today. Even if she knows Kuo was just needling at her, she knows she really will be cutting it close. “Please, just let me stay home, just today.” She pauses, considering. “I’ll shower.”

“Get dressed,” Meiko says, already walking out of the room. “I can’t be late again.”

Eiji is fifteen and a decent hacker, digging deeper and unlocking doors that would get her in enough trouble for a lifetime. She is fifteen and tired and scared. She obeys.
The abandoned factory, used to teach apprentices the rounds, is aged and hollow, gutted of parts and machines that were moved to newer facilities. The tentative curriculum is fast-paced because the ration production factories countrywide can never seem to produce enough to keep everyone fed. Regular school was still going on, teaching around recent events in human history, forcing quizzes and exams as whole parliaments took to space without another thought to the countries they were leaving behind. Technical classes suits Eiji better, straightforward and hands-on, allowing her to do the least possible and stay out of everyone’s way.

Class breaks midday for rest, not lunch. Pro-V rations are for home consumption and hoarding. Too many fights had broken out after attempted stealing of meals and snacks from lockers. Eiji walks out with the crowds, away from the acrid metal and steam from the morning welding lessons. After the close quarters of the gutted building the gray sky feels huge and heavy but the heat of midday still scorches like actual pain.

“Back in thirty minutes, please,” the instructor calls, removing his soft hat and fanning himself with it.

Eiji starts to walk away quickly, hands already sorting out the coding that will let her hack into the Blue from this server, when a hand lands on her shoulder. Rika pulls up next to her. Her grin is overwhelming and wide when all she says is “Hey.”

“Hey,” Eiji says, looking away and back, away and back. She’s known Rika since she was in kindergarten and Rika in second grade, crossing paths in the school cafeteria enough for Rika to start to wave or pat Eiji on the head. They were interactions Eiji had not been remotely prepared for, what with the sullen, confused looks her own classmates
gave her, too many games ruined by Eiji’s lack of patience or comprehension. She soon found herself anticipating those small moments of attention from Rika, searching for her laughing face in the crowds. Eiji’s not sure she’s ever been Rika’s friend, at least not until they ended up in the same technical class, but she’s always been fairly certain Rika has been the closest to a friend she has ever had.

“Where you off to, speedy?” Rika asks. Her face flattens suddenly, mock-serious.

“Are you ditching again? I will not be an alibi, only an accomplice.” Eiji thinks her face is lovelier than butterfly wings, still-pressed, preserved in glass. Sometimes she dreams in pixels and brackets, pure code, but, in her dreams, Rika is always warm flesh, real.

“No, I-- …can you –” Even after all this time, Eiji is not good at these in-person interactions, at Rika’s closeness and open smile. “Can you cover for me? Please. There’s something I – please.” Everything prickles and aches in the time it takes for Rika to answer – there is so much at stake, a whole world at stake – but Eiji waits, just to acknowledge it, to be seen doing the right thing by Rika. Rika, who has a row of beauty spots, three quiet islands to the right of her mouth, curves them up in a belt, an archipelago, when she smiles.

“Go,” she says. “Don’t worry about it.”

Students and workers aren’t supposed to have Blue clearance during work and school hours. It’s supposed to save on the systems’ server and keep everyone from distraction. It means everyone has to rely on the ancient speaker system for emergency warnings, breaks, and dismissals. Only after the final call sounds does each Blue implant get scanned to simultaneously log work hours, admit ration pick-up, and activate Blue access until the next morning’s sign-in scan. Rika doesn’t know Eiji’s cracked total
access. She thinks Eiji leaves to make phone calls from the office to check up on her father, who everyone knows barely shows up for work detail. The whole family gets substantially less rations without his timesheets. It’s safer for Rika to pity Eiji than to know the truth.

Walking quickly, Eiji finds an empty factory and opens the normal interface, almost entirely useless without a server to latch onto. She breaks through the block with only her thoughts and the long-memorized tricks of the trade. The Blue unfurls before her, covering the spread of blank walls and dead metal. With a thought, she finds the alert Kuo’s left for her. Shit, she thinks, even though it’s good news, great even. She fidgets as she reads what she already knows. Clenching and unfurling her fingers to sweaty palms and back, she tries to relax. It only worsens the familiar churning anxiety that seizes her down the length of her spine, clenching her stomach in waves.

Rika’s sat with Eiji through the occasional panic attack. It’s the only time they’ve ever touched, Eiji’s palms slippery with cold sweat, her head nestled between her own knees. The attacks are rare and usually brought on by too little sleep and too much work on the backburners. The only thing Eiji has asked Rika to do in those moments was to talk and talk and keep on talking, clenching her fingers between Rika’s, fighting to find peace.

She wishes Rika were here with her now. But that is not something she is allowed to wish for herself, not in the Blue. She is fifteen and terrified but that cannot matter. Kuo’s message is curt and loaded. All the information is there for this afternoon’s launch surveillance but it’s going to require more legwork on Eiji’s part. Contacts for launch access have been getting sparser and less reliable with more and more of the government-
approved “Necessaries” making their way to the Terra colonies in the First Wave of launches. Eiji doesn’t know who can be trusted. Humans complicate everything about the neat data that should be so easy to interpret. The clock is ticking on Eiji’s rest break.

“Shit.” The still machines stare back unhelpfully. Eiji’s breathing begins to spiral out of control.

Eiji knows what her helpers call her behind her back: 404, some first-gen joke that means very little and only survived this long through resurgence of its use in failed A.I. programming. The slang had once been used for hypertext transfer protocol errors, files that couldn’t be located on a given server. The joke had progressed to indicate a blank mind. “Sapience not found.” It’s added to the fact that in Eiji’s mothertongue the number four is a homonym for death. Rodney tells his protégé to learn empathy as she sits alone in a dark room with machines and blank screens.

The Blue stutters and falters with Eiji’s unclear thoughts. The words loop and bend before settling, steady, as good as it gets. She sends them out, already regretting. She will have to rely on the empathy of others to make any of the work count.

On her way back to the compound, Eiji finds Rika leaning against a wall, staring out. Her usual honey-brown eyes are stained luminescent blue. It’s the problem with the current prototype: Anyone can see the lens of the optic imager every time a person logs on, covering the white of their sclera and the dark pools of their irises. Rika blinks too quickly as Eiji nears, reorienting reality with the Blue. Her head follows the movement of Eiji squatting to sit next to her, skirt pooling around her ankles.

“Shame on you,” Eiji teases. Rika’s hair curls against her neck, stayed with sweat. If she had the courage she would reach out to move it, meet Rika’s eyes for once, maybe
even smile. Eiji stares out at the sky as thunder starts to break through the clouds, hollow and dry. The air crackles.

“My brother found a way to access some of the really old games without a scan pass. A lot of people do it you know. They work without the server.”

People like Rika may never know the whole truth, Eiji knows. Her fingers twitch, anxious, as she picks at the hem of her skirt, feeling the ridges where she’d clumsily sewn in her own stitches.

“Wanna play?” Rika asks. “I can show you.”

Eiji feels her heart pick up, heat overlaying the pale skin of her face. She hates to lie. She has to. “I’m no good at those things,” she says. She lets Rika explain it all to her. Even if she doesn’t pay attention to the procedures she could do in her sleep, she likes watching the way Rika’s teeth flash in glimpses through her moving lips, how she moves her fingers through the air like she’s manipulating her avatars physically, instead of with her thoughts alone. Ducking her head, Rika keeps looking around her pages in the Blue to meet Eiji’s eyes, always smiling.

“Here, here, here, go in the Blue and then we can connect and you can see the game, right? You can watch. Here –”

The truth that they don’t teach in any colony schools is this: The wars and the end of it all had everything to do with cold hard cash. It was money that had funded the military experiments during the Cold War, the ones that had led to the geoengineering techniques first used as weapons, then later toward much more noble uses. It was a global use of funds that had pulled together the Terra experiments, then the rover expeditions after a fully-formed planet appeared on the map with almost perfect human-habitable
conditions. Eiji wonders if Rika even knows that it was a systematic global financial failure that started the wars in the first place, debtors and loaners using increasing force to try to make something exist from nothing. If she realizes that in the end it was the loss of all that money that stopped the geoengineering efforts, held up by the highest bidders, in their tracks. Maybe Rika knew that the famine and droughts came next but what would she care about the scientists who weren’t being paid, who didn’t pay enough attention to the projects they’d deployed before the crash?

Maybe Rika didn’t know, didn’t even care, but Eiji had been there for it all. She, like the other true shadows in the Blue, was not waiting to see what would be kept in the new world. She wanted to know what would be erased.

Rika’s hands framed Eiji’s jaw, her gaze narrowed to a squint, playfully stern. Eiji’s breath catches in her throat. She wants to reach for Rika’s wrist, she wants to grab and feel that pulse, to never let go and lose this, all of this. “You’re not blue,” Rika says. “Your eyes.” Eiji looks at the edge of Rika’s chin and feels the rush of feeling too much clog her throat. She links in. Rika is even more beautiful in the flat wash of sky blue light. “Good, now go to—”

“I’ll just watch,” she says. “Just link me in. I’ll watch.” She doesn’t shift her eyes but she can see her workspaces in her periphery, covered in heavy-duty layers of protection, waiting. Her pulse races painfully at the sight of new messages just beyond, the sign that they’ll be good on today’s launch.

“Can you see me?” Rika asks. Her screen pushes into the rest of Eiji’s windows and Eiji has to look through all of them with blurry, aching eyes to see the ridge of Rika’s
hairline, the crest of her head. It grows close when Rika leans in to ask, “You okay? Are you having trouble with the tech again?”

Eiji doesn’t answer, only scoots closer so her head huddles next to Rika’s. “Better hurry,” she says, sniffing big, just once. “Running out of time, tick tock.”

Their eyes unfocused, distant from the real world, both girls watch balloons fill the grids on Rika’s screen, trembling, bursting like thunderous applause. Eiji lets her cheek touch Rika’s shoulder. She closes her eyes. Rain begins to fall, hitting the heated ground.

The launch sets up like all the other launches long gone. Trucks zoom around the tarmac narrowly avoiding the running technicians in gray uniforms. All is dwarfed impossibly by the ship’s shadow. The craft itself is huge and fortified, layered deck upon deck, windowless, heavy. There is no way to look in and see its passengers or the bleak, stark interiors. The whole hunk of engineering and technology is purely functional. All the ships are meant to carry are sleeping passengers in their fancy beds, to be woken up in the new world like some fairy tale, like a dream.

Eiji looks over the passenger manifesto one last time. The remaining Sino-Korean institutions have been making heavy deals with the Russians for building materials in exchange for the tech required for the thousands of berths on this particular ship, so Eiji is not surprised to see so many names in foreign languages. She is, however, staggered by the sheer amount of Russian passengers on the list. Kuo had run through the names that day and, while there are the usual surgeons and politicians (lower and lower down the list with each launch), there are more civilians this time around. “Rich civilians,” Kuo is
quick to point out. “They’re buying on in heaps. It funds the launches and they don’t even have to lift a goddamn finger. What do they need their money for as long as they can get away? They’re going to be fucking useless in the new world and their money won’t be worth shit there anyway. That’s fucked up.”

“Mm,” Eiji responds, too busy reading files, double-checking what she already knows is solid work from the rest of her hires.

Kuo huffs out a loud, disbelieving noise. “…You can’t rig something from this?”

Eiji sighs and rests her chin on her knee. “Not today I can’t.”

Angry silence fills Eiji’s brain through the audio connection. “Rob a bank. Fake a transfer. Bankrupt a goddamn country. You are fixating on the wrong fucking things; what the fuck is wrong with you?”

Eiji pauses her read-through for the slightest of seconds. “Is this really –”

“You are supposed to be getting us off this planet.”

It would have been easier if Eiji hadn’t started her whole operations on surveillance in the first place, if maybe she’d stuck to snooping and pranking. Maybe all it would take for safe passage really would be enough credit and money to grease the right hands. But it has been too much in such a short period and Eiji has seen all of it. The last few days alone she’s seen more videos of Stateside protests turned fatal, military weapons turned on yelling, frightened civilians who just want someone to acknowledge that the hierarchy of passengers leaves very certain demographics to die with seemingly no regrets. Eiji has spent no small amount of time tearing herself apart over the very same issues. She has seen the gaps in the footage, screens going to black as soon as national guard forces arrive on scene. Starving families and rebels with nothing to lose were
rioting as close to the launch pads as they could get. Eiji can’t help any of them. She can’t even help her own family.

But she is doing what she can. It has to be enough. “There has to be a way to get more people off-planet,” she says. “We’re not budging till we can crack something on building actual civilian ships.”

Kuo’s voice is loud when she cuts through. “No. We talked about this – don’t you dare – you said priority goes to –”

Eiji knows it is not fair. She knows that Kuo is scared, that all her helpers are, that so many have given up hope…but then isn’t that the point? Does it really make sense to save their own skins at the expense of the rest of the world? Isn’t that what everyone else is already doing?

“You talked,” Eiji snaps, losing her patience. “I paid the minimal attention possible to insert help sounds in the right intervals and pauses.” So much for empathy, she thinks. Her lip snags too hard when she smashes her teeth together, regretting.

“Do not act like you aren’t worried about saving your own ass. That was the whole fucking point of you asking for my help as you know goddamn well.” Kuo’s voice is low. Eiji wonders suddenly if her children are napping. She wonders how long it’s been since they all last ate. “You can’t really think everyone everywhere can somehow get passage on these ships to get off this rock? You know how many people are getting left behind and you know exactly why, just like I do. You know what supplies and conditions we are all going to be left in and you want to be left here? Is that what you’re saying? You think you’re going to build a ship after the world’s ended? No one is going to be left by the time you do because they’re not even going to make it to the point of
total toxicity. They are going to fight, starve and kill themselves first. Is that how you want to go? You and your miracle ship?”

Eiji feels her mind shutter and shut down. Images of screaming, crying faces, whole multitudes of bodies pressed to chain-link fences topped with barbed wire, in sight of all those ships, flash like shots fired. It didn’t matter to anyone on those ships that these people were dying for a chance to be a passenger, to mean something to anyone. Everybody in Nippon pretended not to hear about the mass suicides occurring in the colonies. “Nobody deserves to go like that,” Eiji says. “Everyone knows where we stand, including me. But if no one does anything…”

Kuo coughs and coughs.

Eiji waits and tries again. “Look. It is not some kind of big conspiracy, the shipbuilding, and I know we can —”

“Not some big conspiracy. Unlike your anomalous brain scan. Right. That’s not pulling theories out of your ass.”

“Kuo—”

“You wanna go down like a stupid fucking hero, fine. Not me.”

Eiji cuts Kuo’s feed and closes her eyes. Impotence prickles at the edges of her shoulders and ribcage in straining, heaving waves. She can still see the Blue with eyes closed, a dim blaze of light. She presses her nails into her biceps until she stops shaking. The hot pull of at the rims of her eyes recedes.

The Sino-Korean launch goes off without a hitch, flame and swirl and a white-hot core. It takes seven minutes for the craft to break atmo and then — “There,” Eiji murmurs to herself. Relief settles in her veins. She knew she wasn’t wrong. The fury comes back
like a tidal wave the longer she sits and stops being able to figure things out alone. *Maybe it’s time,* she thinks. It is not a comforting thought. She logs the clip and marks the neural atypical lines, second-guessing all the while. Poised on the edge of logging out, Eiji stares hard at the EEG scans. She cracks each knuckle. She thinks of Kuo thinking she is doing absolutely nothing. Eiji is done doing nothing.

The remaining networks are filled with people reaching out, trying to re-ground communications. Eiji posts the clips and the videos chronologically, knowing she is taking a risk. The exposure makes her feel sick, breath catching. “Need help reading this,” she writes. She shuts down her systems before she can backtrack and go back into hiding. She needs answers. The coolant tank goes dark. The saferoom door closes.

The world outside has fallen into darkness. Eiji pads out and finds her father in the living room lying on his back, arms crossed over his chest as though in contemplation. The tatami around his form is dirty and stained, but the straw holds tightly, smelling pungent in the close air. She tries to walk by without being noticed, still shaking, unsteady.

Her father stretches suddenly. “I called in sick to work,” he murmurs gruffly. It’s the only excuse he clings to these days. Eiji’s heard every variation of the argument from the other side of the house. He thinks as long as the factory lets him get away with so many absences then it’s really okay that he stays home day after day.

All Eiji can think of to say is “Oh,” as she crosses the room to the kitchen, stepping over her father’s outstretched shins. She knows he lies on the other end of the spectrum from the American rioters. There is a whole planet out in space, free from gross overcrowding and industrialization, poverty and famine, and so many have been deemed
“unnecessary” to that entire utopia, by means of just being who they are. Accepting eventual death, by one’s own means or not, is hard to condemn under the circumstances. There doesn’t seem to be many other options left. Eiji isn’t even sure that, even if she pulled off a miracle procuring seats, her father would want to get off-planet.

“You should lay off those computers, by the way,” he says suddenly, clearing his throat. He speaks in their mother-tongue, Nipponese, unafraid of the consequences. Eiji stops to listen, grateful for the familiar sounds. “There were power outages all day today. Matter of time before we go cold, so no more playing around. Emergenyc-use only. Stick to the implant.”

That stops Eiji in her tracks. Local power plants were somehow still up and running but it was a poorly kept secret that workers there were leaving for countries offering actual lotteries for spots on ships as builders or genetic diversity seats. The ship builders got better rations than power plant workers. The time had been ticking on public power from the start. “Yeah, okay,” she says. She raps her knuckles on the kitchen doorframe, pausing in stride to process. Technically, she doesn’t need the set-up. The work will just be slower without the physical monitors to sort out wider information. It still doesn’t sit well with her.

Standing in the middle of the dark kitchen, Eiji is in the midst of peeling open a can of Pro-V when the world washes through with a haze of dark gray, burgeoning blue, and an incoming image. The optic implant is not meant to cause any physiological alterations but Eiji always swears she can feel the chip buzzing when this happens. Her thoughts had been far from activating the Blue, which could only mean –
“What,” Eiji asks, flat and cold. She hates being hacked. Rodney’s moon face fills her vision, round and beaming.

“It’s cold today,” Rodney says, without preamble, “when the wind blows.”

Eiji finishes ripping open the Pro-V tin. Their can opener never does the job right. “What does that even mean?” She pulls too hard and the tin slashes through the skin across three fingers. Hissing, she drops the can. Even with her eyes shut she can see the haze of the interface, if not the exact images.

“It means,” Rodney says, “that there’s trouble stirring and people are only noticing because something’s stirring it all up. Like it being cold when the wind blows.”

“That’s stupid.”

“Unfortunately, today I am here to inform you that you are as well.”

Eiji opens her eyes and takes in the damage of each fingertip, visible through the right half of Rodney’s face. He is the only person vain and safe enough to use a camera to make deals in the Blue. The blood moves fast through the spaces between each finger, down the skin of his face. “You know, if you hadn’t tipped Kuo off to…to me then she would still be nice and quiet and not all personal about everything and complaining to you about me.” From the other room, Eiji’s father calls her name, voice rising in question. “I’m on the Fone,” she yells back.

A grin splits the lower hemisphere of Rodney’s unshaven face, cutting through the spikes of prickly gray and white hairs. “Just like we’re schoolmates.”

“Can you just –”

“I’ll make it quick. Been tracking your activity lately.”
Eiji has learned her lesson about rolling her eyes with the interface up but it still takes some effort to control her reaction. Instead she swivels her eyes restlessly across the other feeds in her field of vision, the piles of work where Kuo’s logged out and left everything mid-processing. “Such a good mentor, what with the stalking…”

“I’m just saying, you’re in on some hot info. Luke nuclear. You gotta clear off your message boards, go dark, and get back to some solo digging. At least don’t let people do your dirty work, people that may not be as cool with the truth.”

Walking fast, Eiji finds her way to the bathroom and then to her bedroom, tipping the door shut with one foot. She presses her hands together to staunch the blood. “What do you got on what I want?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, now everything makes sense.”

“Kid, don’t be like that. You know what I can do and I can tell you that you’re looking for help in what is supposed to be one of the safest places left in the Blue and your file is still running hot. Been up for less than ten minutes and it is generating some major gravitation from some full-bodied figures, not just shadows.”

The bandages sit stiff on Eiji’s fingers. She watches the cotton pads darken through the adhesive. Rodney has been running off-the-grid jobs for longer than Eiji’s been alive. He claims he lives somewhere safe enough to never be found, which Eiji doesn’t believe, but, then, he hasn’t been caught so far. He has a knack for decrypting image files and using international satellites to snag surveillance. It’s why he was able to get a camera on Eiji last year and figure out her age. Had he been a different person he would’ve used it against her. Instead he started giving her everything he knew and so the
two have a steady truce on swapping. Rodney is why Eiji even knows about the American riots.

It is the only reason Eiji opens her account and looks for her post. She doesn’t bother skimming the comments. The delete button compresses like a sigh in the direct center of her brain. It’ll take longer to wipe the residual trails leading back and whatever duplicates may have popped up but it’s enough to stymy current hits. “Alright,” she says, a bit sullenly. “Happy?”

“Marvelously so – and so! A gift in return. You know, you should have just come to me first with your curious-kitten questions.”

“You said you didn’t know either.”

“True enough.” A video file unfolds across the feed, spread out across the view of Eiji’s bedroom closet. “Incoming.” Rodney’s face is replaced with satellite photos of concrete bunkers and miles-long hunks of metal curled into strange shapes that look very much like aircrafts. Men and women roam and mill like ants on the Launchpad. It looks like any other launch. “It appears the good ol’ Red, White, and Blue has been keeping up with the Joneses,” Rodney says.

Eiji gapes. “The money…They went bankrupt. They were only supposed to have those first two launches. How did they…?”

Rodeny returns and the lines on his full face crease and crinkle. “That pesky spy program of theirs, if I had to guess. Operates were still in the field when the war broke out and you know those Americans. Where there’s a will…”

“It’s their bio program that got the entire planet in this jam in the first place and they’re not even going to try to help out the rest of us?”
“Keep calm there, little one. I’m not showing you this to get you to right some wrongs. I’m just saying, if the real worry is getting everyone up and not everyone has the funds and the supplies, and, you know, all that, then if a lockdown country like the US has got a way, well…isn’t that worth investigating?”

Eiji shakes her head, sits up straighter. The sheets bunch in her hands when she clenches for something to ground her. Faded heads of dancing bears peek through her bandaged fingers. Little girl sheets in a little girl room. Eiji curls her knees to her chest.

“Their first launches were with help from sixteen different countries. Are you saying they scrapped together this ship on their own? How do you know they have any more? Do you think they could build more?"

“Don’t know. My point is that maybe tens of thousands of people won’t have to die here on Earth like rats, like fleas.”

The words stop being able to come then, computations going through Eiji’s head, staggering to catch up. When Eiji stops looking at Rodney’s face she can see the curtains on her window, some strange mauve shade her mother favors. Her mother will be home soon. “How is this related to the anomaly?”

“Wasn’t exactly going to be broadcasted that they have their own launch today so I thought you might want to check it out yourself. I’ve got some contacts that can get you access to the vitals.”

Eiji takes one deep breath, then another, until it’s too many and her head is light and spinning. “You been shopping this around?” she asks. The spit sticks in her throat. The air tingles like pinpricks down her torn fingertips.
“Ah, little one. You are and always will be at the heart of my operations. I gave you first pickings. Wanted to see some real talk before diving headfirst into anything, but since you looked like you needed a wider sample maybe you can be the one to tell me.”

Eiji shuts her eyes. She is fifteen and brilliant and terrified. “Tell you what?”

“Well, the last question left, of course: How does one become a rocket man?”

The same fire, the same smoke, covers the American Launchpad. They haven’t even fully lifted off the ground when Eiji sees it, the change in the neural readings.

“There,” she says to herself. “There.” Her pulse beats hard in her throat. It’s no longer a correlation with hitting atmo, she realizes. Something is shifting, something is changing those sleeping passengers. But how? And why? Something spirals out of her control, her breathing suddenly too fast, blood prickling in her torn fingers and toes, circulation growing tight. Eiji logs out, panicked.

Without the blue light in her eyes she is just a teenage girl in her bedroom shrine to the girl she never was. She doesn’t have the answers. She has no idea what it means.

Sino-Korea has three more launches over the next two months, the manifestos more and more packed with Russian buy-ons and helpers. No one ever says how many ships to the new world will be, but everyone always expects more, forever more, as long as there are people around. Everyone also knows this can’t be true. No one accepts the truth until what turns out to be the final Sino-Korean launch.

Nippon’s factories continue their daily work that day. Eiji goes to classes and has dinner with her parents by lantern light. Pushing around the government-issued rations, she isn’t even thinking about EEG anomalies or the next launch somewhere halfway
around the world. She is remembering the walk she had taken with Rika during their break earlier that day and the paint chips that fell into Rika’s hair when her arm nudged a cracked rain gutter on one of the buildings. “Where do you think they’ll put you when we finish the course?” Rika asked.

Eiji didn’t know what kind of face she made but Rika laughed, ducking her head like usual to make sure she met Eiji’s eye, like she wanted to make sure Eiji knew it wasn’t at her expense. “Probably with Pro-V,” she answered honestly. Nothing she had done in any of her classes would make their teachers believe she was competent for anything but ration packing.

Even though they both knew that Rika excelled in mechanics, when Rika ruffled Eiji’s hair and said, “Maybe we’ll be together, then,” Eiji had wanted to believe it more than anything.

Spoons clinking, the Tatsuyama family eats without talking. Pro-V, the protein-vitamin packs manufactured in colony, come in a veritable rainbow of colored and differently flavored blocks the consistency and texture of spam. Meiko can only ever stomach the stuff in broths and sauces. It is a rare night that Eiji’s father makes it to the table at all. Happily distracted, Eiji thinks of neither parent.

There is no last conversation and there are no parting words.

The music begins. The speakers outside the factories come on only once a week, on Mondays, signaling ration-pick up, 6 AM sharp. It is not Monday. It is not morning. It has been a month since the last rations came in for this district. There have been altercations at the factories where people have been caught trying to sneak out tins. Eiji can hear her neighbors’ doors opening, the footsteps down the porch stairs.
The music is standard, an orchestral arrangement, forceful cellos and high squealing violins. Droning voices begin in on Nippon’s national anthem, the rolling crescendo of a snare drum. A crash of cymbals shatters the air. Only Meiko makes to move, rising from her seat to cross to the window. She is a sturdy woman with a rounded back and no-nonsense hair shredded in a black bob. It is the last time Eiji sees her, that small figure before the window showing people in the streets, running, hungry. Meiko goes for the front door without a word. Eiji’s father sighs over his bowl, dipping his spoon into Meiko’s broth for a piece of Pro-V that he puts in his bowl but doesn’t pick up to eat.

Eiji wants to ask why the factory wouldn’t just wait for morning to hand out rations, even though she knows how many families are going hungry after so long a wait. She wants to ask why it wasn’t announced earlier that the shipments had come in, so everyone could just pick it up after work. But her father looks so tired and so small and she is still half-lost in wondering if she will ever get the courage to hold Rika’s hand. She stays quiet. She eats her food.

The song is looping for the second time when the bombs begin to fall.

The world is rent into fire and shards of glass. Eiji’s father, with his back to the window just seconds ago, lays face-down on the dining room floor beneath the remnants of the long oak table. The back of his head is wet and red and gone.

Eiji cannot feel her body. Everything is the high pitch careening through her ears and a bright, blinding pain that makes it hard to tell if her own eyes are open or closed. It takes her an eternity to come back to herself, head ringing and turning, bells and swooping swallows and flight. She presses herself up on hands and knees. Her vibrating
body is numb and heavy. Useless. She tries to look around, too slowly, stupidly. The air
is scorched. The feeling in each individual body part comes back piecemeal, screeching.
Her brain is the only thing just barely keeping up. There is an accusation trying to form
beneath the pain, the blood.

Eiji looks at the body that once belonged to her father. He is so still. Eiji wonders
if this was the kind of end he had been waiting for, spending his days depressed and
sitting in darkness. She presses her fingertips to his blood-stained shoulder. The cuts from
that day with Rodney have healed completely. Her father does not move. Even if Eiji
could do her own damn job, he would not be making it to the ship. Eiji does not want to
die. Dead is suddenly so much worse than alone, than left behind.

The music plays on outside.

Someone keeps screaming and screaming.

Everything hurts.

Eiji makes the decision before it can fully form in her mind. She bolts for her
bedroom at the back of the first floor, still untouched by the destruction, the flames. The
saferoom opens with a pass of her hand beneath the back lip of her nightstand. Blank doll
eyes watch her from every corner of the room. She enters the darkness. She locks herself
in.

Another unending boom crackles and blooms, rattling the house from somewhere
further away. In the dark Eiji fumbles through her pockets, back pressed to the saferoom
door. She’s too afraid to stumble forward. The wires and extension cords laid along the
concrete ground would just be another hazard to add to her peril. Her fingers slip and
catch along the cold walls. It seems like just yesterday that she was talking to Rodney and
bandaging her carelessly opened fingers. Eiji shuts her eyes and breathes unevenly, thinking clearly enough to stutter out an order. The Blue unfurls before her, even in the darkness.

A blast rocks the house. Closer? Farther? She cannot tell. She screams anyway.

At the tail end of the booming, Eiji hears beeping, ringing and doesn’t understand. The noise, the noise…she can’t figure out the noise until she comes back to her body enough to unlock audio in the Blue. The screen widens and crackles, goes out. The Blue stutters, a wash of sticky static. The tinny, muffled words are soft through the throbbing ringing, the pulses in her own ears. Eiji opens her mouth only to let out a strange, animal sound when she tries to steady herself with a breath. “They’re after me,” she says. And because she is young and scared and out of her mind with no answers, she adds, “I didn’t mean it. The post--”

An explosion shudders the building, but softer this time. Eiji touches her ear, fingertips coming away bloodied. Her eyes swivel wildly but she is blind in the darkness and the Blue will not come back. “Please,” she says, can’t stop saying it. It doesn’t make sense. The words just don’t make sense. Sounds, they’re sounds.

Feedback screams when the Blue reappears in heaving glitches. Rodney’s face blurs in bars of static as the building shakes and heaves. “Ah, kiddo,” he says, breathing hard. “You fucking scared the shit out of – you’re alive – good – ah, fuck. You’re caught, little one. I got cameras on them, some -- hard to pull together...” The screen switches and Eiji can’t stand to see the satellite image, huge air carriers, plumes of smoke, ash and fire. Bodies, there are bodies. The national anthem of former Nippon plays on and on and it is the cruelest twist of the knife.
“It’s the factories,” he says. The feed cuts out, back in. “They’re getting rid of the factories, all of them. I think –” Rodney shakes his head. “Breathe, you need to breathe. Where are you? How can we get you out of there?”

Eiji cries without feeling it, the tears spilling so simply. “There was music,” she says, head still spinning. She watches the fire on Rodney’s camera, the flicker, the flares. Her nose aches. Smoke. There was so much smoke. “I need…I need to get out. Rodney?”

“I’m going to track you as best as I can,” Rodney says. “I’ll keep your system – E, are you listening? You have to trust me. Is it safe where you are? Where are you? Don’t –” He pauses. Yells her name. She looks up at the screen, sees her house. Men are entering. Why are they coming in here? Why would they destroy the factories?

She can’t answer. Her chest heaves but she cannot breathe. She understands suddenly that the last Sino-Korean launch was really the last launch. Her trembling fingers start to moving, coding nonsense in the air. “I need a seat. I can do it. I just need…”

“You gotta come back to me, E. Come back. You hear me? Come back to reality. We’re gonna get you out of there. Eiji.”

_The wind blows_, she thinks. She watches Rodney shut down her system from his haven so far away. The screens go dark. Only his voice is left in her earpiece. “Be brave, little one,” he says. “Breathe. _Breathe_. You got this. Now just tell me: Where--?”

The connection cuts. It doesn’t come back.
PART ONE – Rover: Johanna

01. Charlie

Three years later...

There is a routine to the end of the world.

Before anyone on crew is even awake, Charlie laces up her steel-toe boots and dresses with her eyes lit up Blue just to find the right clothes. There are no windows in the room she shares with her sister and so the dark is heavy and thick, broken only by the thin strip of light bleeding in beneath the front door. Charlie does her best to stay quiet. She makes a game of it most mornings. Cassie is probably still asleep on her thin metal cot across the room, but the maroon sheet on the shower curtain rod she attached around her sleeping area prevents Charlie from being sure. She still whispers, “Bye, Cass,” as she navigates her way to the door, just in case.

Out in the dormitory hallway, Luis and a handful of other neighbors are already waiting. They all live together on the fourth floor of the factory’s living quarters. Their small group walks down to the hangar together every morning with the excuse of being early risers. In truth, Charlie hates the mornings, has to violently command herself to get out of bed most days, but she loves the work and the people.

Her next-door neighbor, Luis, is an elderly gentleman with a smooth dome cranium and a middling salt-and-pepper beard. He greets Charlie with a quiet, “Buen día,” and offers his crooked arm while still leaning against the wall between their two doorways. “Shall we dance?” he asks, jokingly.

Charlie gamely accepts and squeezes his hand around her bicep. “How’d you sleep?”
“Same old,” Luis answers, shaking his head. Nobody sleeps well in the dorms, either too keyed up from downtime and too much time to think or too exhausted from work and the horrors of facing reality every time they leave the factory.

“Same old,” Charlie repeats and gives small smiles to everyone as they pass ahead into the stairwell. Luis gives her arm another squeeze as though in apology.

Down the steps, Luis uses their linked arms for support and they shuffle down and down, all four flights. “Ah, old bones,” Luis jokes, like he does every morning. He grips the railing and hoists himself down another stair. “Rain today,” he says. “I can feel it.”

Charlie smiles indulgently. She says, “Well, let’s hope you’re wrong.”

This is also part of the routine. It hasn’t rained in this part of the world in three years.

Whoever takes the lead in the group knows to wait for everyone at the exit on the first floor. Today it’s a younger girl, Ash, still in her late teens but already a mechanic-in-training for the crews, which is great because so many rovers have been downed over the years. Ash does a check of everyone’s faces, her own bandana wrapped around her lower face. Everyone gets on their makeshift protective gear before Ash even moves to undo the locks to the door that leads out into the desert wind. Charlie helps Luis put on his heavy duty surgical facemask for protection. She presses her favorite handkerchief to her face and nods at Ash from the back.

“Here we go,” Ash says, sleepy-eyed and voice gravelly. No one else makes a sound.

This time two years ago there hadn’t been need for medical personnel on rover runs but lately the amount of people in outer cities in need of a doctor has radically
increased and Charlie knows it has everything to do with the winds. The black mold in the oceans is still prevalent and growing as far as anyone knows. The First Wave of launches was commissioned so quickly that no one stuck around to really study the secondary metabolites of the radiotrophic fungi. All anyone knew was that the ionizing radiation caused a rapid increase in the fungi’s reproductive rate and that the spores coming off the fungi was what had sickened so many. Nobody stuck around to try to combat it. They just went away.

Luis looks up at the sky, one hand still clutched at Charlie’s elbow. The last remnants of night linger across the desert. The stars and moon have only just begun to fade. “Always beautiful, isn’t it?” he says. His words are muffled. The factory used to have enough paper facemasks for everyone to utilize on the ten-minute walk from the dormitories to the hangar, but those days are long gone. Luis coughs behind his tattered mask. Its holes are patched with masking tape.

Charlie squints her eyes in a smile when Luis looks her way and does her best to not think about poisoned oceans and empty buildings. There are a lot of things she has to remind herself to not think about in the aftermath of the First Wave: the well-kept house she and her family had lived in all her life, the friends she had made in school and their last conversations before she and Cassie had been swept away into safe houses, the keepsakes and photo albums she left behind in her messy bedroom, and especially her fathers away and gone, forever and always. Charlie forces herself to look up at the sky and think Beautiful until she can feel it. The sky is beautiful when she can forget that there is something, somewhere beyond.
Back when the world was right, Charlie was Charlene Hong, daughter of Oren Hong and William Conway, co-founders of what would eventually be a medical empire, providing technology and medical supplies worldwide until they had the monopoly on the market. They had been guaranteed seats on the First Wave launches from the very beginning, and so had Charlie and Cassie. Charlie is no longer Charlene, and some days it is a relief, but she is still a doctor in this strange world, just like her fathers always wanted. She wonders too often if it’s supposed to mean something, if it is a cosmic clue that it doesn’t all have to end here, slowly dying along with planet Earth. She has seen the effects of the mycotoxins being dispersed by the wind, coming in from off the oceans, further inland each year. Hong Meds, Inc. could have done more before they left but instead all the world has left of that industry is just Charlie Hong, not even Charlene.

**Beautiful. Beautiful.** Up in the sky, Charlie can make out the familiar outline of the constellation Cassiopeia. Charlie may have been Charlene but Cassie used to be Cassiopeia Hong in their other life, too. It is the only thing that relaxes Charlie and it is like the sky opening up, sighing.

Charlie never thought she and Cassie would ever find a place like this. The hangar itself has its own air filtration system, just like the dormitories. There are barely a hundred people left at this factory, workers, transporters and their families, all from the original roster from just before the launches. The Hongs are late arrivals and it had taken face recognition and their preceding reputations to get them rooms in the dorms and spaces on the ship to pull their weight. She doesn’t care that the only thing keeping this many people together are the air filtration systems that run the whole day long, although that alone makes the factory a miracle, an oasis. She’s seen the great, wide world post-
launches. People don’t stick together. Not even Cassie wants Charlie around most days; it’s not some big secret. It’s easier for some people, Charlie thinks, waiting to die alone.

Charlie doesn’t want to die alone. She presses her handkerchief harder to her nose and mouth and counts as many stars in the sky as she can while keeping the pace with the rest of the group. She feels it. “It’s beautiful!” she yells over the wind to Luis. Some people ahead turn to look back at the sound and Charlie points exuberantly with her free arm at the sky. “Beautiful!” she cries, over and over. Luis crinkles his eyes over his facemask, laughing.

“Old bones know,” he says.

The others enter the hangar. This time when Luis asks Charlie for her hand in a dance, she takes the lead. The steps are gentle, in consideration of Luis’s weak hip and knees. Together they spend a few more seconds in the poisonous air of a dying world, dancing like young lovers before sunrise.

Some days Luis feels like a father, like Charlie’s own Dad coaxing her to tell her all about her day even while looking so exhausted and sick with stress. Some days Charlie pretends she never had fathers at all. She’s not sure which is worse.

Charlie, her sister, and the rest of the crews are transporters. They all operate out of an active Pro-V factory. The national and international Blue networks are down so Charlie and the others can’t be sure whether any other factories—or anything else for that matter—are still up and running. There isn’t really much time to wonder about it, thankfully. The hangar floor is plastered with the new major imperatives of the company: LIFE SUPPORT. FOOD PRODUCTION. SAFETY FIRST. Charlie has never been sure
they make much sense but they get the point across. There isn’t much time to worry about the rest of the world (or even the Terra colonies, which no one talks about) when there is day-to-day survival to concentrate on.

“Have a good one,” Charlie tells Luis, bending down to brush a kiss on his cheek when she drops him off at his workspace. They are both doctors aboard respective crews.

“I meant to ask,” Luis says, suddenly turning. “How’s your stock?”


Leaning in, Luis lowers his voice. He shuffles from good knee to bad knee. “Now, it hasn’t happened to me but Gwen over on Goblet’s crew says some things have been going missing… Pencillin, tetracycline, erythromycin…”

Charlie frowns. There is no cure for mycotoxin inhalation for this strain of the black mold spores, especially not with the permanent exposure in the outside world that would render treatments ineffective almost immediately, but crew doctors have been trying to alleviate some of the worst cases for the traders that come in with the most valuable supplies. “Thanks. I’ll be sure to check and let Q and our captain know.”

“Good.” Luis claps Charlie on the back softly. “You don’t forget to tell Suo about the new routes now. Eric said she wasn’t at the last captains’ meeting. Don’t want you all getting in trouble on her account.”

“I’ll be sure to tell Quincy and Suo.”

Charlie walks quickly to her crew’s rover as the others flip on the light switches and start up the air filtration in the wide, open hangar. Her crew’s ship is named Johanna. Charlie’s never asked about the name but she doesn’t think any answer would be satisfactory after this long anyway. The ship is an Inner Atmosphere Transportation
rover, IATV, all dinged up and clumsy and absolutely wonderful. On the inside, the ship consists of two decks: the lower houses the cargo hold, the infirmary where Charlie works, and the tiny cluster of rooms that make up the crew dormitory. The upper-deck is made up of the bridge, commons area, and the engine room, with the latest addition of the new tech room where storage used to be held.

Charlie heads for the upper part of the ship and climbs the metal ladder rungs that lead up the side of the engine room to a hatch in the ceiling. She knocks politely and waits, suspended. Some mornings the hatch will open. Biting her lip, she waits a few moments more. Today is not one of those days. “Good morning,” she calls. “Honey, open up.” She waits again. “I’ll be in the kitchen if you want some company, okay? I’ll be back to check on you.”

Their tech is young, barely eighteen, and the crew’s captain assigned Charlie to look after her when they discovered some of her symptoms after her first night in the dorm. The girl breaks out in panic attacks that scare even Charlie with their severity. When she’s had a bad night or feels a bad day coming on, she locks herself away in her room. Everyone’s figured out that she prefers Quincy’s hard heart to Charlie’s educated check-ups and attempts at initiating some kind of talk therapy. Quincy is allowed in the room. Charlie is not. She leaves for the kitchen.

Mornings on the ship are dead quiet. It’s not exactly Charlie’s favorite time because she prefers sleep and the silence gives her too much to either think or avoid thinking. Still, it is part of the routine and the routine is important, is everything. Before Gregor and Cassie arrive at the hangar to report for work, Charlie has usually finished inventory and stock on the infirmary, talked with the other crew doctors about city
conditions, and prepped a breakfast of hot Breakfast Bonanza Pro-V. The rest of the time she spends in the Blue.

A holdover from post-war days and only just barely working within the factory and rover boundaries on a local server, the Blue is somewhat limited but still functionally valuable. Everyone has a work feed and a personal feed, with different connectivity to others in the factory on each. Their tech, usually always logged in, is not online and so Charlie knows she has reason to worry. Somewhere in the dorms, their pilot, Quincy, is reading through the reports from the last run while their pilot. Distracted, Charlie sifts through her personal feed even though she’s long since memorized the order of each photo she’s uploaded, every detail and facet of the faces and places. If she concentrates on these new memories then she cannot think about the past. It is how she passes the time. Partway through doing inventory, Gregor, sends a message that he’s heading up to wake up Cassie and so Charlie heads up to the commons to start breakfast, her supplies forgotten.

She sees her sister and Gregor entering the hangar ahead of time on one of the overhead screens above the dining area. The crew’s tech is a surveillance junkie, which is great for the crew but also sometimes creepy when Charlie thinks about it too much. She’s spent a lifetime of avoiding paparazzi photos and hoards of people who thought of Oren Hong’s eldest daughter as prime pickings for financial aspirations and coattail riding. Still, it’s somewhat useful to be able to see people coming and going. When she sees the messages Gregor has also flung her way on the way out of the dorms, she steels herself.
“—well, maybe if you could just be a little —” That’s Gregor, deep-voiced, coming into view in his ever-present green, knit beanie.

“Fuck you.” And that’s Cassie, Charlie’s younger sister by two years, still wild-haired from bed with pillow creases down her cheeks.

“—kinder then this wouldn’t happen and I wouldn’t have to—” Gregor interrupts himself this time when he spots Charlie at the large table in the commons, already seated on the bench on the far side, facing the doorway. “Doc, first of all, your room is so gross, I cannot stress this enough —”

“Good morning,” Charlie says.

“--and second, your sister bit me. Again.” He holds out his forearm as evidence.

Charlie glances at it and then says, “Hey, Cass,” as her sister passes her. “Did she really?” she asks Gregor, the words registering.

“Yes!”

Cassie keeps barreling through the commons, boots unlaced and crud still flaking in her eyelashes. She only barely pauses to take one of the trays from the table, grudgingly standing still long enough for Charlie to kiss the back of her head in greeting, bristling immediately when Charlie asks, “Why do you do these things?” She heads towards the small stairway up to the bridge. Cassie is in training to be a pilot. That’s not why she takes all her meals up there or alone in her crew quarters. She doesn’t say a word to Charlie, only looks over her shoulder to roll her eyes very exquisitely, the bad habit she learned from their current pilot, Quincy Nasib. Charlie can’t tell if it is an eye roll of shared exasperation of a general dismissal of the situation at large. Cassie slams the door behind her.
“I’m sorry. She’s sorry,” Charlie says, patting the table for Gregor to join her.

“She probably didn’t mean it. Look, food.”

Gregor sits unceremoniously, the bench clattering beneath him from a loose screw. “No, stop it. You start too many of our conversations like that. I don’t want you to apologize, I want her to – and what do you mean–? Of course, she meant it – no. You know what? Never mind. I’ll just talk to her about it again later.”

“No, you won’t.” Charlie moves her mound of Pro-V around into an approximate sad face. She tries not to laugh. “You kind of have to wake her up just right.”

“And how is that?” Gregor grins ruefully. In the beginning he had ensured both Hongs got to work on time, what with the sisters being heavy sleepers and awful with their own alarm clock. Charlie got better after a while once she started taking on more duties on the ship, namely checking in on their tech. Cassie…still needs the help that she doesn’t want at all, ever.

“Haven’t figured that out yet.” Charlie smiles back, all teeth, mostly apologetic.

“Did she break skin?”

“Negative. But she did proceed to changing her clothes in front of me – which, no -- and calling me about eighteen different names that I know she learned from Quincy because I’ve heard them all before and they all were just as hurtful the second time.”

Charlie does laugh at that. “I’m sorry. Let me check out that bite after breakfast. We’ll get it all sterile. If you stay very still I’ll even let you have one of Q’s animals. Or an imaginary sticker. Your choice.”
“You ladies can just wake up late from now on. See if I care,” Gregor says, examining his arm again. It’s not the first time Charlie’s heard this threat and she doubts it will be the last, so she only nods.

“You still taking her on the run today?” she asks.

Gregor shovels a wad of Pro-V in his mouth and chews like it’s the worst thing he’s ever eaten. Charlie tries not to be offended. Living off of Pro-V for going on three years has admittedly become a chore, even if it is the only thing keeping them all alive.

“Yes, even though she is ungrateful and violent.”

“Thank you,” Charlie singsongs. She gets up to clean her tray and make an extra for their tech up in her room who can never seem to remember to feed herself.

“You’re okay with her going?” There is skepticism in Gregor’s voice.

“Yes.”

“Really?” he asks.

“Yes. Are you?” Charlie grins. She knows what the crew thinks of her, her sister, and their passive-aggressive relationship.

Gregor traces his name on his tray and finishes chewing. “Not really,” he says, “considering she bit me.”

“Hmm.” She finishes loading up the tray. Each of the crew members gets their own metal plate, which Quincy labeled neatly with everyone’s sort-of names as bestowed by their magnanimous captain. Gregor is G, Quincy is Q, and so on. The Hongs have a unique situation, having the same first and last initials, so the captain’s just taken to calling them Hong One and Hong Two, respectively. That’s who they are: Hongs. They
stick together, even when they hate each other. “She is going to be great,” Charlie assures him. “She is smart like a warrior zebra. I’m going to take these to E.”

“Doctor,” Gregor says very seriously, waving his fork around to punctuate his point. “I understand nothing about you or that sentence.”

“Thank you. Meet me down in the infirmary if you’re serious about that bite. I have to finish some reports before Q gets here.”

“E’s awake?” Gregor asks belatedly.

Still half-sunk in the Blue, Charlie checks with her right eye. “No, she’s still not logged in.” Gregor chews a little slower, brows raised. Forcing a smile, Charlie shakes her head in response. “Maybe she’s just sleeping in.”

They both know that’s a lie. Gregor says, “You know Q won’t let Cass come on a run if we don’t have eyes on us.”

Charlie does know. Part of her personally-imposed and strict daily routine includes checking on their tech before the captain and Quincy can get to the hangar before take-off. Usually E, their tech and surveillance, has not eaten, showered or slept or any combination of the three. As the medical personnel onboard Johanna, Charlie’s job extends a little past technical duties to ensuring that everyone – E – actually stays alive before the workday even begins. E is integral to their entire work schedule. She makes sure nobody on crew gets hurt. The world outside the factory has always been dangerous but it’s made more so by the crews landing and practically dangling whole supplies of rations in exchange for factory necessities. Eiji makes sure everyone gets back alive. Other crews aren’t so lucky.
Back at the hatch, Charlie knocks again and waits, counting to one hundred before knocking again. “Sweetheart, open your door,” she calls up. She waits another count. She leaves the tray at the foot of the ladder.

Still carrying his breakfast in hand, Gregor enters the engine room eating the last of his meal. It’s how Charlie knows he’s more concerned than he lets on. He and his wife, Talla, look after E on the nights when she’s willing to attempt sleeping in the dorms instead of the ship. He asks. “She not coming down?”

“Not yet. I hate to ask, but can you please try coaxing her out when we’re in the air if she’s not out by then?”

“I’ll try. She’ll drop down if it gets bad, though so don’t worry about it.”

The ship feels emptier without E’s screens, installed in every room, feeding down info from her range of computers up in her room. Charlie can distract herself from a lot of things with her work in front of her but too much, including E’s distance and medical condition, make her remember too much about the old world. “How about that arm of yours?” Charlie asks, just for something to do.

“You know, I was just joking. Well, I mean, not about the biting, but, you know, she didn’t break skin.” Gregor’s already logged into the Blue and started opening pull-out hatches from the ship’s walls, each clogged with his various tools and equipment. He says, “You should just save your supplies for the run.”

Charlie tries not to think about runs when they’re grounded and safe at the factory. Objectively she knows Gregor is right and that she has been saving her inventory for the people in the outer cities. She even knows most of the science behind why she should be hoarding her supplies because she’s seen it all in her outpatient tent:
birth defects and tremors, cancers, and immunodeficiencies. A little cut on Gregor’s manly bicep isn’t exactly a top priority.

Charlie sighs and stops in front of her supply cabinet before she turns around, eyes averted. “Okay, thanks. You’re right.” She scratches her nose. “But actually I have kind of a question…”

Gregor groans. “Doc, if you need something or if you have a problem, you don’t have to sneak a conversa – Wait.” Gregor’s spoon pauses mid-air. He points it at Charlie, which is not too menacing considering the edge is blunted and Charlie is about a foot taller. She stays still and takes it anyway. He asks, “Did you tell Cassie to bite me? Because that will change the tone of this conversation.”


“You can do it, doc. Ask me your question.”

Charlie shakes her head but smiles anyway. She appreciates how everyone on crew takes her at face value, gives her the benefit of the doubt without her once very public persona negating her current presence. It’s still hard for her to do any of this, though, to exist alongside these men and women and just be, even with all the work to be done. “Okay, so, I don’t know how often you check the stock out on the floor for all the med techs –”

“Never.”

“Right, but, so, things have been going missing and have you noticed anything else missing? I think people are swiping stuff and Luis says it’s because they’re worried the factory is going to go under soon.”
“Have you brought this up with Q?”

“No.”

“Is anything missing from your stock?”

“Not since the last run but I haven’t had time to do a full inventory for today either…”

Gregor nods. “Alright. But you should really tell Q even if you aren’t missing stuff.”

“Yeah…”


“Do you think the factory is going under?” she blurts.

Going back to his food, Gregor shakes his head. “I thought you were the smart one, doc. Of course, it’s not. One day, maybe. But not today.”

It is not exactly what Charlie wants to hear but it will have to do. Just another in a long line of things she would prefer not to think about. It’s just easier not to think about any of it.

By the time the captain and Quincy arrive in the hangar for crew reports and prep for lift-off, the sun has been heavy in the sky for two hours. Suo Hasunuma technically runs Johanna. She is an intimidating presence, charismatic and knowing. Everyone in the hangar knows about her past as a protest leader on the Western launchpads; she was even on some nightly news reports as someone to look out for on base. Dark-skinned and sharp-eyed, she is easy to recognize as a woman to be reckoned with, even when her face is curled in loud laughter. Charlie only gets glimpses of her entering most mornings, right before lift-off, because she usually hangs around outside talking to other crews for a
while. Suo’s second and the rover’s pilot, Quincy Nasib tends to do check-ins with the crew in her place.

“Morning, doctor,” Quincy greets, on her way in through the hull at the rear of the cargo hold. She is a serious woman with tanned skin and onyx hair that hangs loose around her face. “Sorry we’re late. Everyone else here?” Charlie likes the colorful strips of fabric Quincy always keeps tied to her frayed belt loops despite her stoic mannerisms. Their presence has something to do with Quincy’s two-year old son, Clarence, but nobody on crew’s ever been brave enough to ask.

Charlie hesitates, coming out of the infirmary and into the cargo hold. “Good morning, and yes. I know you just got here but may I ask a favor?”

Quincy reverses direction and pauses, still looking anxious to get to the bridge. “Shoot.”

It’s usually best to be direct with Quincy who has little patience and double the workload with all of Suo’s duties. “Can we talk later? After the run? There’s been some talk among the crew doctors that I think you and the captain should know. Just about some stealing going on in the hangar.”

“Okay. We’ll talk. Is E up yet?”

“No, but, uhm. About that. Is Cassie still able to go on a run if E –”

Quincy holds up a hand. She looks very, very tired. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Who said your sister was going on the run?”


“No.”
Charlie is too shocked to speak, let alone retaliate. Even though Quincy isn’t the captain on this ship, she does wield just as much authority and that means her word is almost always as good as law. “Why not?”

Quincy raises both brows very pointedly. Charlie has yet to be on the receiving end of Quincy’s infamous temper – that’s usually reserved for the captain and Cassie’s pilot training lessons as far as Charlie can tell – but she’s always afraid of that first time for everything deal. “Doc. Were we riding the same rover four days ago? Your sister rode us against an entire wall. There are scratches the length of Johanna’s whole body. She’s lucky she didn’t breech anything with a stunt like that because not even our air system would hold up to that.” Charlie purses her lips and looks away. The scratches hadn’t looked that bad. Superficial at best. But she’s not about to say that to Quincy.

“I just thought…” She can’t think of a proper excuse. She knows Cassie is going to be crushed.

Quincy sighs. “Shit, doc…” She doesn’t try to pat awkwardly at Charlie’s arm like she did that one time, but she does kind of deflate and stare up at Charlie like she wants the words to just appear between them. She sighs again for good measure. “Okay, I know you mean well and she’s your baby sister and all but she is seriously seven kinds of trouble.” Charlie kind of resents that but she bites her lip. “Now if she’s not going to listen to me or the captain, you’re going to have to pick up some slack and start getting her to see sense. She needs to take this training seriously. You know how many rovers are down and out for the count. She’s not going on that run until she earns it. For her own good.”
Charlie touches at her headband and tugs at her jacket lapels. She unconsciously goes through the straightening ritual she went through before exiting any building in the time before, expecting that rush of interrogation and flashing bulbs. “Right,” she says. “That -- Can I maybe at least be the one to tell her she’s grounded? For the flight. She might. I don’t know.”

“That would probably be for the best.” Quincy rotates her neck tiredly and gives the doctor a small, forced smile that doesn’t meet her eyes. “I’m sorry. I know you try and whatever.”

Apologies and small talk are not Quincy’s forte and Charlie appreciates her trying. It makes her want to try to pull apart that chink in Quincy’s armor, just a little further. “She’s really smart,” Charlie says. “She can do this.”

Quincy’s almost smile is a little more genuine. “I know she’s smart.” Her expression sours like she’s remembering something, probably the last run and Johanna’s belly shuddering along cold concrete. “She’s just also a jackass, too, so, you know. Can you, please?”

Charlie touches at her headband again and nods. “Will Cass at least be allowed on the bridge today?”

Quincy only lifts a brow, a warning for Charlie to quit pushing things. “We’ll see.”

As Quincy starts to leave, Charlie clears her throat again timidly and reaches out. Quincy knows the drill. She turns back around, brow arched, just a few sentences away from losing her patience. Charlie sighs. “One more thing: E’s locked down. I think she might be out for the count today.”
“Of course, she is.” Q pauses like it’s just one more thing to add to her list. She nods, mostly to herself. “I’ll check on her.” Her eyes go Blue and she turns to book it further into the ship. “Thanks for the heads-up. We’ll talk later.”

“You’re welcome.” Charlie is left alone in the infirmary.

The whole rover rumbles as it’s started up and moved out to the airfield for take-off. Alone on the lower floor of the ship, Charlie scans everyone’s work feeds. She sees Cassie’s connected in the bridge, going through take-off sequences in sync with Quincy. Charlie doesn’t know how she’s supposed to tell her sister she won’t be going on the run. It’s all she can think about, but there’s no one around to ask. She knows better than to bother anyone else on ship; it takes a full crew to keep Johanna in the air and working properly these days.

At the back of the infirmary, where old testing equipment is stored, Charlie sits with a box half-full with yarn and paper animals. Quincy makes almost all of them, especially on overnight runs or when she’s reading reports. She does it all: knitting, crocheting, sewing, origami. Charlie steals what she can of the stuffed animals Quincy makes but doesn’t take home to her infant son, what gets left in a box marked “FREE” in the commons. She holds onto something orange and misshapen – a camel, maybe; a donkey? horse? -- but it doesn’t have the answers she needs either. Things missing, no run for Cassie, stranded at the end of the world, Baba and Dad gone and not coming back… All the things she’d rather not think about.

Quietly, very quietly, Charlie mimics animal sounds, alone in the infirmary at the bottom of the ship. The camel horse smiles back at some cosmic joke.
Johanna is transporter-standard from during the war, stolid and sleek, originally intended for long-distance disaster relief efforts. During the war, Pro-V factories sprouted up just to help keep the majority of the population alive. After the launches, there wasn’t much reason for Pro-V to keep trying to help everyone, especially without government funding and help from the national guard with distributions. From what Charlie’s seen of other cities, all the other factories have folded. It takes work and supplies to keep the machines running and the Pro-V in production. Their factory is producing the only food source in miles for the survival of its own admin and workers. They touch down in cities with rations for trading only because it is necessary. There are supplies enough for the basis of the protein-vitamin rations for maybe another year but the nutritional elements still require certain agricultural components. The outer cities that still have access to crops and plants provide this in exchange for Pro-V tins.

At the first stop of the day, Charlie distributes ragged face masks, the same the crew has been re-using on runs for the past year. Suo smiles in greeting but keeps up her conversation with Gregor about something to do with the ship’s exhaust system. Gregor steadfastly does not meet Charlie’s eyes, which is fine because Quincy stares hard and long enough for Charlie to get the message that she has stalled long enough. Charlie saves Cassie’s mask for last – marked “H2” in green ink— and makes sure that their fingers don’t touch when she hands it over to spare herself Cassie’s special scowl. “Hey,” she says quietly, like sharing a secret. “How about helping me in the tent today? I could use a hand.”

Cassie spends an eternity staring, a mixture of confused and affronted, like all those years thinking her older sister was actually an intelligent being have come to an
end. “No,” she says. She starts to walk away to suit up with Gregor in the hazmat protocol when Charlie reaches without thinking, her fingers closing around Cassie’s wrist. Cassie jerks immediately, dislodging her. “What are you doing?”

“Uhm, Cass,” Charlie says. “I would really appreciate your help today so maybe you can do the run another day? Please?”

Cassie is just barely shorter than Charlie but the rage she carries in her heart always seems to make her tower, looming. She keeps her long hair pulled back in a high ponytail like a bullwhip. “No way,” she says, entirely unrepentant. When she turns away, her hair flashes, cutting off the conversation. “Do it yourself.”

Charlie starts to reach out again but stops herself, wrings her fingers. “Cass,” she says, a little more loudly. Her heart beats out of time. She isn’t really sure what she’s afraid of, but she thinks maybe it isn’t entirely about hurting her baby sister’s feelings. “Please.”

It’s all it takes for Cassie to narrow her eyes, comprehending. Her temper is just as quick and Charlie actually takes a step back, unsure who the first victim will be with so many to blame for this kind of decision. “What’s going on?” Cassie asks, low and curt.

Charlie licks her lips. “You can’t go today and I’m sorry but you’re not going. E’s down for the day and you’re not seasoned enough to do the run, which is fine, you’ll just work the tent with me like you usually do and --”

“No way. No fucking way.”

Everyone else keeps studiously working around them, getting Gregor geared and boxes rolled out and ready. Charlie shakes her head. “Look, you’ll go on the next run. It’s dangerous out there. We just – Cass.”
Cassie walks away, practically accosts Quincy, who gives her a single look, reared at full height, coming only up to Cassie’s chin, and this time it’s Cassie who takes a step back, slightly cowed but still resentful. They talk quietly in a corner for a moment, joined by Suo who dusts her gloved hands and rests an elbow on Q’s shoulder.

“That could have been worse,” Gregor comments, coming by with his hazmat helmet tucked beneath his arm. “Is she still a warrior zebra to you?”

“Yes,” Charlie says stubbornly, wounded. “Are you going to be okay on a solo run?”

“Guaranteed or Talla will go warrior zebra on all of you. See you in a bit.” Gregor pushes on his helmet and latches it. He gives Charlie the thumbs-up and starts heading out. While the others handle trades and the outpatient tent, Gregor usually scouts for anything the transporters can use for the ships or the factory floor in scrapyards or anywhere around the abandoned parts of the city. It seems safer than interacting with the increasingly desperate crowds trying to trade in for rations, but Gregor’s been shot at and mobbed more times than anyone’s comfortable talking about.

Back in the corner, Cassie has started yelling and Suo’s deserted Quincy entirely, making her way towards Charlie and the hull exit with another crate of tins. “Get her shit together or she’s grounded for the flight,” Suo says as she passes. Her mouth is drawn tight and Charlie tenses further, fingers curling into fists around the material of her jacket. Outside the hangar the captain is typically downright jolly. Her serious face looks ripped straight from her past as a protest leader, all business and reckoning and brimstone.

Charlie walks over immediately, arms crossed, hugging herself. “Cass…” she says but it doesn’t penetrate the volley of her sister’s raised voice. Quincy just stands
there, taking it because the captain won’t and the only person Quincy loses her cool for
also happens to be the captain. “Cassie,” Charlie says again, louder, as Cassie rages on
about productivity and the injustice. “You’re not going today,” Charlie says, practically
has to yell to be heard. “It’s dangerous and I don’t want you to get hurt.” She doesn’t dart
a single glance at Quincy. She takes in her sister’s reddened cheeks and wild eyes. Cassie
has the same springy hair that Charlie keeps chopped short, coming undone from her
ponytail in tendrils that slip across her face. They have the same eyes. They’re sisters. It’s
what makes it easier to lie, to protect. “It’s my fault. I asked Q for your help in the tent
because I was afraid you would get hurt. I’m sorry and you can go on the next run when
E can run surveillance. I’m sorry.”

It’s harder to think about why Cassie is more willing to believe this but Charlie
sees that she does, that she just re-bottles her rage in that secret place she keeps it, full of
dark thoughts from the past when Charlie’s place was as heiress in the family, leaving
Cassie with nothing but the title of second daughter. It was supposed to be different here,
at the end of the world. She doesn’t know who’s to blame for not letting go.

Cassie doesn’t even spare her yelling on Charlie, just walks away, like she always
does, and leaves Charlie behind like she wants her gone for good. Quincy starts to move
forward, sighing, but Charlie only turns to her and forces a smile. “Let’s go,” she says
before anyone can bestow their sympathies.

At the first stop there are only the usual fractures and bruises and cuts gone to
infection. When Quincy checks on Charlie before they all pack up again for the next city,
she hands Charlie a panda folded from several layers of paper. Charlie doesn’t know
what noise a panda makes so she just holds it up in thanks and says, “I’ll be sure to take
pictures of him doing things you don’t approve of later.” She knows it’s what’s expected of her, just like it was before the end of everything. She is the Hong that doesn’t yell and fight and cry.

Quincy does her spectacular eye roll. “Dreams do come true.”

Charlie smiles and smiles and stands around in the crew quarters outside Cassie’s door for the whole flight, daring herself to knock, until she just goes to the infirmary to rip the panda into panda pieces that fall like a celebration.

The work after that first step ramps up. Unfortunately, a big part of the routine involves providing medical consultations at each stop of the run and then providing almost no actual help unless the particular patient will be of service in the long run. It is the worst part of the job. It is one of the worst parts of this new, strange life.


The doctors on each crew have medical backgrounds that range from school nurse to pharmacist to med students who hadn’t even begun their residencies. All of the medical personnel have zero history with studying or treating illnesses induced by mycotoxins of any kind. There are some back at the factory, like Gregor’s wife Talla, who have some background in things like botany, but the problem is that no one stuck around to formally study the effects of the black mold on humans after the first year of
results and illness. This part of the routine is empty. This has nothing to do with the crew’s survival.

“Okay, now I need you to hold still. If you look at my eyes, they’re going to go Blue and I’m going to open a program that lets me look inside at your lungs and insides, alright? It’s kind of like an x-ray.”

The man nods and wheezes. His temperature is slightly elevated but that could just be prolonged dehydration. His cough is dry and his lungs look atrophied, not fluid-filled, which would make Charlie rule out pneumonia – one of the more common consequences of the black mold spores so far – except for his shortness of breath. She does her best not to wince when she sees the dark spots covering this man’s lungs, thick as soot. He’s lucky he brought in a large haul with a verifiable continued source of –

Charlie’s breath seizes when she unlocks her supply box, ready to hand out a small dosage of antibiotics to this new steady trader. Missing supplies. Her mind circles in around the phrase crazily, unmoving. “Sir?” she says steadily. “I’ll be right back. I just have to get approval from my superior and we’ll have you out of here with some medication.”

“Thank you,” he says. He coughs and coughs.

Outside, Quincy and Suo are dealing with riots at the gates around the perimeter of the airfield. The desperate population has thinned out over the years, caring less and less about the injustice of not receiving rations or medical treatment, focusing instead on different modes of survival. Still, there are the persistent few who come armed to the teeth and still try to find ways to make trades with the insubstantial. Charlie stays behind Quincy and explains the situation in hushed whispers, pulse pounding, ears ringing.
“You can’t give the man what you don’t have,” Suo says, overhearing the entirety.

“He won’t keep trading with us if he thinks he’s just going to go home and die,” Quincy says quietly from over her shoulder and Charlie stares down at her, hating her own comprehension.

“I can’t do that,” Charlie says. Her face runs hot and cold at the stress and the cruelty.

“You will if you want the Pro-V to keep flowing,” Quincy says and it is dismissal enough.

Charlie talks the man through his water-collecting routine and tries to stress that he’ll need more fluids and lots of rest to get better if it is just a cold. She offers him a four-pack of painkillers and doesn’t hesitate to pretend that they are antibiotics. That they will make everything better. She explains that she’ll be back in two weeks to check on him again if he still has something to trade with the crew. She doesn’t tell him to worry about lung abscesses or sepsis or waking in the night unable to pull in air. Instead she goes to get the next coughing patient, then the next and the next. That day she sees hand tremors so bad the whole examination table bangs and shakes; enough joint pain and inflammation to make her ache head to toe. Then there’s kidney damage, probable liver cancer, bloody phlegm, and several newborns with severe birth defects twisting them every which way. There isn’t any medication that will help them, any of them. They look accusingly at her face mask when all she can give them are over-the-counter painkillers. Some cry when she hands them these same pills and passes them off as antibiotics. They grasp her hands like she’s given them a cure-all, a miracle. Charlie says she’ll be back.
She lets herself feel the fact that these people will be dead by the next time the ship touches down in this city.

At the end of the day, Quincy makes Gregor drop his stuff from the dump and help her break down Charlie’s outpatient tent. She shoo’s away the doctor. The captain herself leads Charlie away and back into the ship, making small talk about the gossip she heard from some of the people in this dingy overrun town. Those same people crowd and yell at the departing crew because there’s not enough rations for trade, not enough medicine, not enough sympathy, not enough anything. Charlie waits until they’re in the ship to lean against Suo, just a bit.

The captain slings an arm around Charlie’s shoulders and jostles her gently.

“What a day, huh, doc?”

“Long day,” Charlie agrees but she thinks I’ve killed every one of them and the words loop and dip and crowd every crevice of her mind.

Suo has to tiptoe to reach up high enough to push Charlie’s head onto her shoulder, but once she has it there she pats at it. It’s hard to walk this way but Charlie stays put. If her sister won’t do this much, at least her captain will. While Suo keeps softly hitting Charlie like a disappointed puppy, the yarn wrapped around her wrist scratches Charlie’s face. The burn of it is not punishment enough. Charlie doesn’t know how to cry about any of it. She doesn’t think about it, she doesn’t, she doesn’t…

She sits in the commons with Suo and they play cat’s cradle with the captain’s yarn until Quincy and Gregor get in position to take the ship back into the skies.

“So if I pull a knot like this is that still part of the game?” Suo asks.

“No.”
“Why not?”

“Because it’s a knot, not a…” Charlie breaks off and grins at Suo’s delighted laughter. Her breath catches and it almost trigger something in her. She has to look away and pull at the string between her own hands. “I’d better take count of everything before we get back. We’ll have to report it to admin,” she says, getting up quickly.

Nothing hurt less, back when the world was right, but hurt differently. Charlie sticks to a schedule and any attempt at a smile. In another life Charlene Hong had to be a very perfect someone. Charlie can’t quite fool herself into just being Charlie, not every day, not all the time. She cries alone in the infirmary, examining the unbroken lock on her supplies, comparing numbers from the last inventory. The flight is long. It’s not like she needs her sister’s comfort or forgiveness to make the day any better, but she sits in a pile of wrapped syringes and empty vials, typing up apology messages she just deletes, until she falls asleep on the flight home.

There’s not much to do in the downtime at the factory, especially at night. The Hong sisters usually end up cooking separate meals and staggering their trips to the communal shower on the third or fourth floor of the dormitories. There are always reports to write up for admin and the captain (but, really, Q), about the day’s run and current inventory. Admin has a steady and understandable curiousiosity about the state of health outside the factory, the answer to which is always grim, especially today’s.

The Hong room is entombed in lack of interaction, the silence broken only by either girl shifting in her rickety metal cot or the sizzle of Pro-V being fried up on the small single-burner stove. Heartsick and guilty, Charlie listens as Cassie gets restless and
stomps off to visit the other crew members for company (which still stings more than Charlie thinks it should after all these years). It’s part of the routine for Charlie to wait a good fifteen minutes before she goes to find her sister and does her best to be part of something despite her sister’s resistance. Tonight she figures it’s best to let her sister blow off steam and badmouth her without actually sitting through any of it. It’ll just make her feel worse about herself.

Swathed in the thin blankets all the factory workers and transporters are issued, Charlie logs into the local Blue server and loses herself in the light and colors. Part of her own feed is linked to a blog their tech helped her set up on one of her good days, dedicated to Charlie’s photography. She has shots of the crew and ship, and a lot more of the toy animals that Quincy leaves all over the ship and that Charlie commandeers for her own purposes. Pausing over a picture of the ill-fated time Gregor piggy-backed Suo around the hangar, and another shot of Quincy looking on at the feat, horrified, Charlie breathes deep and tries to relax. She knows these people are her family now…but they are not Baba, and they are not Dad.

The thought creeps through unbidden: Baba would have known what to do today. He and Dad dealt with so many of the sick all the time…but they had never had a shortage of supplies. They were the suppliers.

Charlie sits up in bed, sunk in the Blue, trying to pull herself together. Tomorrow or the day after will be another run. There will be another one after that and again and again, all the way into the foreseeable future. This is life now. There is no time to mourn dying strangers in the outside cities. Life is the factory and the rover and the crew and Charlie’s small haven of chosen memories placed permanently in the Blue.
The thought doesn’t work the way it was supposed to. The Blue blurs when Charlie’s eyes blur over with spilled tears.

The room feels both bigger and smaller with Cassie gone. Everything and nothing is part of the routine, but mostly the sinking sickness that clogs Charlie’s chest, eloying her every step with faint nausea. Charlie falls asleep most nights thinking _end of the world end of the world_ until the words lose their meaning and she can muffle the sobs.

She’ll start again tomorrow, bright and early.
02. Quincy

Nobody can see the black mold from the lockdown dorms but, even this far in, nobody ventures outside the air filtration boundaries. It’s getting harder to keep two-year-old Clarence Nasib content with staying in the room, his tiny hands pressed longingly to the dirty glass windows. Quincy doesn’t know how to explain any of it to him. “Wanna go outside,” her son says like a mantra. He wanders the apartment perimeters with his fingers trailing the walls.

“Let’s play in here,” Quincy placates him each time. “We have to stay in here, okay?” This time at least there’s Suo to use as an entertaining distraction. Suo, tall and strong, who scoops up Clarence every time he passes, like a bridge troll extracting a toll, lifting the boy high. Suo, who has nowhere to go but her empty apartment after the day’s work is done.

“Doc said every patient she saw today mentioned it,” Suo repeats over Clarence’s hybrid plane-dragon noises. She chuckles when the small boy launches himself onto the still unmade sofa bed. Taking it as a reprieve, she heads for a seat at the kitchenette table. Even in her civvies, Suo Hasunuma is primarily a palette of washed-out grays. The pallor clouds the bags beneath her eyes and the early wrinkles across her cheeks. Her skin is earth-rich and dark. Her smile is tired. “Said some people are even thinking about getting to South America to check it out. Crazy.”

Quincy shifts her weight, feet still aching from the steel-toe boots that refuse to be broken in. “Whatever,” she says dutifully. The Pro-V in the pan fans out and wilts when she tosses it. The room stinks perpetually of canned meat. “Did they mention they all heard it from someone who knows someone?”
Every several months someone will claim to have heard about a launch that can’t possibly exist. Small countries in Southeast Asia are a particular favorite, rumors still running rampant about the old Sino-Korean factories being stoked back to life, so a new rumor about Brazil scrapping together enough ships to save 80% of its refugees is just one in a long line of improbabilities. Too much of the world has dropped out of the Blue and so, logically, Quincy Nasib knows to put little stock in the gossip the crew hears on ration delivery runs and she scolds even Suo for spreading such stories…and yet her heart picks up speed at the mention of the word: launch.

“You know how it is. I figure if E’s not picking up anything it’s all bullshit,” Suo says.

“Not sure E would tell us even if she did know.” Quincy throws Suo a wry look in time to watch the older woman reach out and snag Clarence mid-run again, curling him into her like a trap. He shrieks laughter and it is the best noise Quincy knows. Wriggling away and dropping to the ground, Clarence suddenly looks too much like Jack, the dank hair that flows over his gray eyes and the look he gives Suo when he props himself up. Quincy has to tear her eyes away when he throws back his head and laughs even louder, delighted at Suo’s monster claws descending toward his stomach because he doesn’t look like Jack, then, or even Quincy -- just Chelsea, through and through. “You staying for dinner?” she asks loudly. She knows Suo’s been giving away part of her weekly Pro-V supply to the new additions to the crew, Charlie and Cassie, who still aren’t on the rations list at the factory.

Suo nods. “Please and thank you.” Clarence rolls over and gets back on his feet, scampering away. The dragon noises start soft but gain confidence as he disappears into
the bedroom. Quincy turns down the stove. She takes a seat across from Suo and groans when Suo begins to unravel the circlets of colorful yarn she’s taken to keeping wrapped around her wrist.

“Why?” Quincy asks in dismay.

“Shut up and go find your small child before he and his dragon burn down your closet.”

Quincy makes a face but gets up anyway. “If memory serves, you said you would watch him.”

“There are limits, my friend.”

“A spectacular five minutes, evidently.”

“That would be it. Is dinner ready?” Suo pulls an ornate pattern out and spreads every finger wide. The design sits like a spider web in the open air. It’s been ages since Quincy’s even seen a real spider. “Lookit.”

“You’re hopeless,” Quincy declares, despairing at the shrug and smile she gets back from Suo like what can you do? She goes to find her small child and his imaginary dragon.

Over a meal of overcooked and sparsely seasoned Spaghetti Pro-V, both women talk about the day’s run – the shortage in rations and the growing unrest; their new recruit’s unending penchant for sullen rebellion; their rover’s probable mechanical demise – and take turns cleaning up the mess Clarence makes of his own portion of protein vitamin supplement. “Cass is getting to be a problem. She doesn’t take orders,” Quincy says. She cracks her knuckles one by one.
Suo smirks down at her plate. Both women reach to right Clarence’s upended cup at the same time. “You said the same thing about E. She’ll get on and it’s better anyway. We can just have the doc straighten her out at home.”

“Not true. For one, E is not better, I just gave up, and, two, Charlie Hong has a sister complex and you know it.”

“But I like Cass. She makes you yell at things. You’ve both been getting very creative in that department. I kinda want to know what comes next.”

“A massacre,” Quincy affirms.

“Or making out,” Suo suggests with a cackle, dodging the balled up napkin Quincy throws her way.

As the evening wears on, though, Suo gets more distracted, much quieter. A few more hours and she can’t even look Quincy in the face despite her joking. It gets to be too much to hold up a half-hearted conversation. Clarence gets put to bed earlier than usual and Quincy gathers her courage as she pushes aside piles of unfolded laundry to her side of the fold-out bed. She returns to the kitchenette and sighs. “What’s up?” She tries hard not to clench her teeth. She knows what’s coming. “You haven’t made fun of my child’s name all day. You sick or something?”

Suo makes a face. She unravels her yarn again and starts a new game, holding out large X’s for Quincy’s perusal. “It is a stupid name.”

“Still my father’s name. Every day.” Quincy takes her turn and once the yarn is on her hands, she undoes the game and wraps it around her own wrists. “What’s up?” she tries again.
Suo gives her a look with dead eyes, unimpressed, and looks away, put-off. Her gaze settles on Clarence, asleep with his limbs thrown out. It takes another couple beats for her to eke out a quiet, “He looks like her doesn’t he?” When she looks up her eyes are already blurry with tears.

Quincy flinches. “He doesn’t,” she says. “So can we not?”

“Don’t be like that,” Suo says. “You’ll get wrinkles.” She keeps her face steadily averted, eyes fixed on her empty plate. “You know what today is.” Quincy waits it out, just a few more seconds, and Suo gives in, glances, then just as quickly looks back to the cracked tabletop, her own hands. Her fingers close into fists and release, shaking. “Two years,” she says. “Jesus.” She scrubs at her face, presses the heels of her palms into her eyes.

“C’mon,” Quincy says quietly, irritated. Sometimes when she looks at the captain she can still see the sun beating down on the lone figure Suo cut, rising up out of the heat wave that day so long ago. Near the eastern drop-offs, the pavement steamed all day long. She remembers the way her sister, Chelsea, looked at Suo even then, on that first day. “I can’t – just…don’t do this.”

“Do what?” Across from her, Suo’s shoulders tighten and it is like the air is being sucked from the room. “We’re just talking. Two old war buddies…” Quincy is too often aware how often their being together feels like a walk through the desert just beyond the dorms, scorched skin, hopeless attempts, and a high risk of illness and fatality. But nobody else in the dorms, in maybe the entire remaining West coast knew Chelsea. Neither woman can risk that total loss of connection, not just yet.
“We’re not war buddies. Quit it. You can’t even doing this without cracking jokes? What is that?” Clarence makes a noise in his sleep and Quincy watches his tiny body until his breathing evens out again, chest rising and falling. She will never admit it out loud but she sees it too, every day: More than Jack, there are far too many glimpses of her own big sister in her young son’s face. Quincy holds onto the anger for one moment longer and then rolls her eyes, throws the blue-silver yarn back across the table. “I don’t know what else we can say,” she says.

Suo struggles to pull herself together. In the low light it’s easy to see the strands of white that have begun to appear in her crinkled hair. “Why don’t you ever want to talk about this? Three years, no words. How are you not about to explode? Look, this will be good, alright?” Quincy feels herself shutting down, the feelings slipping back into a small box compressed deeper, deeper. “She was your sister.” Restless and getting no reply, Suo starts to shrug off her jacket, revealing the red shirt beneath. The flash of color is enough to make Quincy flinch.

Chelsea Nasib died with blood in her throat and a steel rod through her midsection. No one had been able to stop when it happened or to salvage the body later. By the end, Quincy and Suo were trapped in a holding cell with over forty other women. There had been no goodbyes. All Quincy has left of her big sister is the image of open eyes and gore down split skin, insides running out. Red still soaks the dark of her dreams.

“She loved you a stupid amount, okay? That’s it. Conversation over.” Quincy says, the way she does every anniversary when Suo stares at her, so brokenly she can’t stand it. The words come out like a sacrifice, shards of bone and bruised entrails. She
hates having to say it. That great love at the wrong time was what got them in trouble in the first place.

“Ah, well,” Suo says. Her voice wavers, watery. “I guess she sort of loved you, too. Constantly competing for her affection with you…” There is no punchline.

Quincy rolls her eyes, refuses to feel the burn of burgeoning tears. “Yeah, well.” She doesn’t want her dead sister’s once-love. They sit and look anywhere but each other, the aged captain with stormy hair lighting up like cloudbursts against her dark skin, and her pilot in the image of her own ghost sister, shorn hair, long bangs.

“Yeah,” Suo says.

The anniversary of Chelsea’s death always ends the same: with kitchen sink liquor and Suo’s oft-repeated, tired stories of how Chelsea was an awesome and also terrible girlfriend. Quincy contributes nothing, per usual, wanting it to end and not knowing how when the pain just goes on and on. “There was this thing she used to do –” Suo slurs.

“Please refrain from the details of my sister’s—”

“—with her tongue --”

“—sex life. Stop. Stop it.”

Neither woman shares any memories that occurred after the first protests. Suo hogs the bottle that reeks of chemical cleaners. Quincy slows her speech and lengthens her syllable to sound less drunk. They swallow down vile liquor around the lumps in their throat, mimicking the swagger in Chelsea’s voice, and Quincy waits for Suo to fall asleep at the table before she lets herself cry.
During the war Quincy had wanted nothing to do with, she had seen the softened edges of her sister’s toothy grin, looking to Suo for reassurance. Chelsea had always been a force to reckon with, but for once in her life she was with someone and she wasn’t running. Quincy would watch for the moments when her sister’s hands would clasp with Suo’s briefly in passing, two idealists indulging in the romance of a war-torn affair. Later, Quincy would wonder if she and Jack ever looked like that to anyone. If just their bodies leaning toward each other was enough to convince someone that they were with the right people. That they were fighting for the right reasons.

Now Jack arrives in the mornings and never even comes past the doorway. He keeps to the same boundaries, resting against a particular spot on the lintels where the paint doesn’t flake too badly. The faded gray of his shirt catches white dust. He asks, “Did you tell her?” and then, nose crinkling, adds, “You stink. What is that? Bleach?”

“Good morning and shut up,” Quincy says, starting to hand over a still bleary Clarence, who protests and digs his small fingers into her biceps. “Kiss mama goodbye,” she says quietly. “Be good for your daddy today.”

“Suo’s here,” Jack deduces, chin nodding at the discarded second pair of boots. “You talk to her yet?” Quincy doesn’t answer and he knows Jack knows the answer by the way his face shifts into that hard expression she is all too familiar with after too many 3 AM arguments and Quincy absolutely refusing to cry or apologize. Jack always hated that more than the fights. “Quince. When are you going to cut that umbilical cord? She runs your ship, not your life.”

She flexes her toes in her boots. She can already feel the rubbing of yesterday’s blisters. The alcohol and reminiscing burned too much out of her. She breathes evenly,
too nauseous to draw this out. “I don’t have time to go chasing some sketchy rumor. My job is keeping us in the dorms and keeping us alive, which is more than I can say for your pie-in-the-sky, clandestine bullshit. You want to go chasing a launch? Be my guest, but you are not taking our son with you. Do you know how crazy I would sound, asking for leave for that?”

“You want our son to die here? With you? Mother of the year award. What can Suo possibly do to you if you keep slinking back that’s going to be worse than the world ending? We are living on borrowed time. The factory can’t hold up forever. You know shit is going missing from the floor.”

The stare Quincy levels at Jack is both a moment of self-collection and a reminder that their relationship is nowhere near where it was a year ago. The toilet flushes down the hall. “We’ll talk about it later,” she says. Her mouth floods with saliva. She’s not sure how much she would regret throwing up on her ex-lover’s ratty blue sneakers.

Jack looks away first. He touches Clarence’s with his nose to hide his expression. He knows what later really means. “You are her crutch and she has been taking advantage of your kindness for years—”

“If this is about the Brazil thing, I’ve already heard it and it’s bull—”

“It’s Stateside,” Jack says. His gray eyes are bloodshot. “And I’ve got as good a confirmation as we’re going to get. Come with me to meet them.”

It catches Quincy off guard. “What does that even mean?”

Suo comes out the hallway, pulling on her jacket. She greets Jack with a curt nod of her head, wincing at even that slight motion. Shouldering her way out the door, past

The look Jack gives Quincy is a challenge. “Follow the leader,” he chides. Clarence murmurs quietly, turning around in his father’s arms, searching out Quincy with a crumpled brow. Quincy kisses her son, lips lingering. “Let’s talk tonight,” she says. She leaves Jack to the sound of Clarence’s hiccupping sobs.

The lockdown dormitories stink of overcooked Pro-V and stale air. Quincy books it two stairs at a time, stomach revolting the whole way. Clarence always gets uneasy in the hallways and Quincy’s certain it’s because the stench is like something fermenting in deep darkness, like the stagnation of the entire world.

“You can be nicer to him, you know,” Quincy shouts to Suo who remains a whole flight of stairs ahead the entire way down and out towards the exit. She can’t seem to catch her breath, heart stuttering from Jack’s unexpected proclamation. There was a time she would still have ached from the lack of heartbreak she would feel looking him full in the face, like seeing a stranger, their whole history in ashes. Now he reappears with no pretty sonnets or wet kisses, only the possibility of a launch and Quincy hates the fine line she must now tread. “Hey, will you wait up?”

This cycle repeats, too often. Suo can only talk about Chelsea when she is truly and wholly wasted, but when she’s sober enough she avoids Quincy like the plague, embarrassed or resentful, Quincy can never tell. Maybe it has something to do with reliving her admittedly short-lived glory days, protesting against the launches, even working with factions trying to destroy the ships on the launchpads or the factories providing the parts. Waking up the next day -- trapped by circumstances, faced with the
fact that they all failed, that they all got left behind -- is never easy. Quincy knows Suo’s gone far past giving up. Quincy cannot afford that luxury, that quiet surrender, not with Clarence’s upturned face looking hopeful, so hopeful.

“Wait up. Suo.”

“Hurry up. We’re already late.”

Both women pass through the exit checkpoint, transporter idents scanned by the patrolperson. The desert that’s only grown since the war and the weather tinkering stretches out and out for thousands of miles, flat yellow land. Quincy’s seen it all, flying out in every conceivable direction, further each time to make trade with cities with no factories, no governance. It isn’t a life she’d have picked for herself even five years ago, but it’s something. She knows it should be enough, here at the edge of humanity…but it is nothing close to a launch.

“Haul ass, Q. Jesus.”

“Shut your face. I may puke.”

No one on the American west coast has seen rain in over two years. Quincy thinks about the rumors the doc’s heard in her pitched-tent clinic and wonders if Brazil has been getting any rain lately, if it’s been acid or beautiful, cool water. Launch, she thinks. Her chest seizes.

Quincy spent her birth country, Canada’s, first launch in an American prison, shivering with a stomach bug. The projectile vomiting that followed was the most patriotic she’s ever felt. There had been forty-three women in their holding cell the night all the protestors had been booked and processed. A little over a week later and just Suo and Quincy were left. Suo was literally Quincy’s last remaining friend and she had still
refused to hold Quincy’s hair back from the torrents of bile. “Wash up later,” she murmured, unapologetic. “Better out than in.” Her fingertips glanced up and down the ridges of Quincy’s spine, palm always kept afloat. Through the shudders, Quincy thought about clocking her final friend in an upper-cut, full-stop. She knew Suo had picked up that show of comfort from Chelsea, who loved everyone but hated touching. But then Quincy’s big sister was dead by the night of that first Canadian launch. Suo was all Quincy had left.

“Hey, c’mon,” Quincy calls out to Suo, who remains ten steps ahead. “What is your problem? You were willing enough to talk last night.”

Now, chasing and yelling, she wonders how long they can keep up this charade, this weird dependence that never should have been. Chelsea was supposed to have been here, filling the space between. It wasn’t supposed to be this hard. Quincy wonders, traitorously, just how much of the past she could leave behind in a single launch. Even this.

Suo stops and turns, breathing hard. Outside the sealed dorms nothing has noticeably changed in the air but the potential for toxins is there. Suo’s touches at her collar, her circlet of yarn. She opens her mouth, closes it. “We’ve got work to do,” she says. She slumps and rests her forehead against the curve of Quincy’s shoulder. It is an immediate apology. She says, “And I am so hungover.”

Quincy breathes out, frustrated, relieved. “That is not what I’m talking about.” Even as she pats obediently at Suo’s head, they do their dance, skirting the same territories Chelsea left behind, only to let it all trail off and lie dormant, festering. I could end this, she thinks traitorously, heart aching, accelerating. This could stop. All this could
stop. “Fine,” she says. They walk together and split a can of cold Bacon Pro-V for breakfast. Between breathing heavy and swallowing the thick chunks of protein vitamin, Quincy’s stomach clenches, curdling. Launch. Launch. She feels sicker with every step.

Everyone at the hangar greets Suo enthusiastically and Quincy warily, in that order. There are only six remaining crews and rovers on call in the factory, down from over thirty in the pre-war days. “Morning, ladies,” a mechanic greets. Quincy doesn’t remember his name. That’s what Suo’s good at. “Heard about Shenzhou?” he asks, keeping step with the women. Quincy doesn’t keep up with Suo’s small talk with the other crews and this man is no exception. They stop at the building entrance and wave to security.

The hangar’s air filtration is a welcome relief from the dangers of the short walk to and from the dormitories. Quincy breathes deep and tries not to think about how other cities are holding together, if it’s all gone to hell at the end of the vast desert. For the first time in years she dares to wonder what life in the Terra colonies could be like for all those who escaped. She thinks about Clarence running around outside on real grass, laughing his Chelsea-tinted laugh. She thinks about nothing hurting. Launch, she thinks in the spaces between heartbeats.

It is a thought that is hard to hold on to in the noise and chaos of the hangar, the grim reality of Quincy’s whole world. She bears it. With a single thought, neural impulses firing, the local Blue network, rigged in factory and dorms, jolts into view, booting up. Quincy’s grateful the implant had been made permanent to all residents of the lockdown dorms who worked the factories. Even if the worldwide network is down, work on the ground goes faster with some tech help, even in this rudimentary version of the
interface. She watches their rover’s feed scroll past and blinks through the sheer amount of information the rest of the crew has fed through since the last run.

“Guess E talked to Cass about her reports,” Quincy says, readjusting her vision to keep the interface in focus even as she navigates her way around people and equipment.

“Yeah? Let me know how they are,” Suo says quietly, looking sicker than ever. Spotting something she slumps against Quincy one last time, murmuring, “Oh, thank God. Take care of rounds for me, pretty please.” She makes a beeline for Charlie and Cassie hovering around their rover’s back hull.

“Yes, captain.” Quincy sighs, watching Suo depart for her a morning argument with the doctor over using crew supplies to cure her hangover. It is an argument the captain rarely wins. Suo is always just the captain past the security gates but it is Quincy who pulls most of her duties. Quincy can’t help but wonder, like every morning, what Chelsea would be doing, here at the end of the world, if she’d run second for Suo, if she’d have her own crew. She can picture her walking through the hangars, all eyes turning. The light always caught the stud through her left nostril just so, even indoors. Quincy smiles, stops smiling. But, no. The last time she’d seen her sister, the rip through Chelsea’s nose had been slow to heal. The silver stud was lost in an abandoned apartment near a now-abandoned Western drop-off.

“Hey, boss,” Gregor calls and Quincy sees him notice Suo belatedly, waving, before making a beeline for the pilot instead. She wonders if Suo even notices anymore and it grates. It wasn’t always like this, she thinks, and then has to wonder how true that is. “Yo. You get E’s message?”
“And then some,” Quincy replies. “Just saw the extra shipments. Is our girl gonna hold? You know how she is on back-to-back runs.”

“Should, but it’s been awhile since we were cutting it this close on supplies and repairs.” Gregor glances over his shoulder at their rover, Johanna, a scratched and scraped beauty, sitting heavy in the incoming morning light. Through her name, painted on black with a jagged homemade stencil, scratches run deep from Cassie’s first few solo runs at piloting. “We’ll make do,” he says. “Take it easy on the altitude though. And, you know, if you’d approve my filework on a search for new parts we wouldn’t have to worry so much about falling out of the sky.”

“Find us the extra solar panels to keep afloat and I’ll stop worrying about a lot of things. Check with E about the weight gain. We’re flying on borrowed time. I don’t want us going down on wrong calculations.”

“Yeah, heard about Shenzhou. Their craft out for the count?”

“Grounded for the foreseeable future.”

“Shit.” Gregor worries his calloused hands together. “They gonna be allowed to stay in the dorms? Because Goblet’s crew is saying they got shot out of the sky. Rogue rover. It’s not their fault.”

Everybody’s got too much time to talk these days. Besides the launch rumors, there’s been stories among the transporter crews about strange crafts tailing the Pro-V ships, getting too close or approaching like a shot from the horizon, there and gone again. Of course, nobody can back up any of the rumors with anything concrete, not so much as a video capture or still photo. It’s just talk.
“Don’t listen to that shit,” Quincy says. “The report’s not even up yet. We should check it anyway to see if we’re in for the same malfunctions. Maybe we can scout for some ships next run, too. Someone around here might be able to fix something up.”

“Alright. Maybe the cap can throw her weight around about keeping them in the dorms though?”

Quincy purses her lips. Supplies are low and anyone not pulling their weight is just using up precious clean air. “You see Goblet, you tell him to beg off duty from Pammy in the factories. She’ll get him on the machines. Maybe he can get the rest of his crew up to speed on mechanics. They always need them there.”

It should be easier to shake the evening off, all the remnants of the anniversary of Chelsea’s death, even Jack getting under her skin, here in the daylight. Quincy rolls her shoulders and neck, eyes blazing blue, trying to let the work overtake her. The hangover’s even begun to fade a little around the edges, dull enough to mostly ignore. All around mingling crews jog to load up factory shipments by hand, shouting orders and reprimands that ricochet off the walls. Everything seems more real here in the grime and stink of sweat. The rising heat of day already borders on unbearable. She never lets herself feel like they’re all doing busy work when just maybe there is a chance to leave, to live…except today.

“I gotta finish rounds,” Quincy says, already edging toward the ship’s entrance, intent on checking in with their tech. If E hasn’t heard of a Stateside ship construction, it can’t possibly be true. Gregor swipes a hand beneath his nose and nods, but doesn’t otherwise make to move. Quincy knows better than to ask but Gregor’s a good mechanic. She throws him a bone. “Something else?”
“Uhm,” he says, hunching. He looks around at the crowds and lowers himself even further like readying for a secret and Quincy takes a step back, dreading. Gregor’s right eye is sunk in the Blue, the left a clear, deep brown. Most transporters have taken to the hemisphere-specific interface to multitask with reality, but Quincy sees him all in Blue, too close, too close. “Did you talk to Cass yet?” he whispers. A loaded pause follows. Gregor’s face goes very still and ludicrously, devastatingly hopeful.

“Are you serious?” Cassie had barely been on crew for a month and already wants to fly the rover on her own, to go out with Gregor and play handyman, to do everything she is definitely not ready for on crew. “That is not my problem,” she says. “I have enough to do. You apologize to her. You are a grown person. Goodbye.”

Gregor knows better than to grab Quincy by the arm so his hands flutter helplessly through the air as he sputters and matches his strides to hers. “She will kill me in my sleep,” he hisses. “It wasn’t even my fault!”

“Then stop making promises. She’s not going on a supply run. It is dangerous out there. Go do your work. Quit it.”

“Come on,” he wheedles. “Cass worships you. Just get her off my case before we’re in air. E even said you’re piloting today and that means Cass won’t have anything to do—”

“No.”

“C’mon, she listens to you, she’s your number one fan, she—”

Too many people in the hangar have turned to listen as Gregor’s volume rises, as he drops to his knees in supplication. “If you stop now, I’ll talk to her if I see her,” she says very softly, wanting only for the conversation to end. She makes it sound like a
threat. Already shuffling away, too aware of the frantic relief that suffuses Gregor’s young features -- and, really, it’s overkill -- Quincy stops him before he can do something mortifying like thank her. “Do your work,” she says. She glances at the green beanie perched atop his mass of hair gone puffy in the humidity, the wool barely holding the cloud of tresses together. Quincy was the one who left it in the cardboard box in the commons marked *FREE*. She says, even more gruffly, “Check with E about the weight gain.”

“Aye, aye,” Gregor says, saluting her.

“Stop that.”

Quincy slips through into the cargo hold and the wash of noise from the hangar dims. Across her feed she sees Gregor connecting his feed to Eiji’s in the Blue, their comms scrolling by like white noise with the rest of the inventory logs as Eiji checks the ballast. “Captain, we gotta talk back-up. *Shenzhou*’s down, that means we’ve got five crafts left and almost triple the amount of cities left on our docket left to visit.” Turning, she acknowledges Charlie with a simple, “Morning, doctor.”

Charlie Hong is vivacious, whip-smart, and unfailingly polite. It would bother Quincy more if the doctor also wasn’t the only other person on board to take things from the box of discarded crafts projects everyone else pretends doesn’t exist. She caught the doctor digging through its contents one night, stealing only the paper animals Gregor had taught Quincy to fold early in their acquaintance. It took a night in the converted storage room, E grinning lopsidedly at the exasperated question, to reveal the photographs Charlie took of the animals – in absurd places, doing ludicrously lewd things – arranged
in triptychs in the Blue. She has a huge fan base in the hangar. Quincy respects the doctor out of sheer fascination.

“He’s taking little Hong on the next survey, you tell him that,” Suo says, her body blocking most of Charlie from view, despite the doctor being a full head taller. “She comes over just to nag about that, almost every goddamn day this past week, what even is that – ow. Hey.”

“Are you kidding me?” Quincy says, finally noticing the IV hooked up to the needle in Charlie’s steady hands. “Doc.” Quincy’s voice rings off the rounded walls.

Charlie peeks over Suo’s head. “It’s a long run today,” she says, the end lilting up like a question. There is a hesitant pause.

“Always is,” Suo says, looking over her shoulder at Quincy like she’s secured some great victory. “And this wonderful woman could only resist my charms for so long. She has verbally admitted what an honor it has been jamming vitamins into my system.”

“It’s true,” Charlie adds, smiling ruefully.

Quincy makes a face back and sighs. “How long’s she gonna be hooked up?”

“With luck she’ll be good to go just before take-off,” Charlie replies, stooping slightly to gauge Suo’s blown pupils beneath her flashlight. The captain tries to duck away and it throws Charlie off-balance. Their shoulders collide and they both start playfully scolding each other. Quincy flinches at the sight of their inclined bodies, even if Charlie looks nothing like Chelsea. She has to walk away. All she sees these days are shadows.

You could leave, she thinks lowly, a whisper like a hidden betrayal, growing louder the more she thinks about it. There could be a launch on the other end of Jack’s
attempts. Launch. Together with her family she could leave Chelsea’s lost body behind –
the snap of blood, that dripping sound of pierced flesh -- escape all the poltergeists and
dark monsters that trail Johanna in the night. The memories of the war and launches pass
through with so much sudden adrenaline that all Quincy can see are blurs, not bodies.

“Did G talk to little Hong yet?” Suo asks.

Too lost in her traitorous thoughts, her words come out in bitten off syllables. “He
said maybe if the captain talked to everyone and not the pilot we’d all get more done.”

Unfazed, Suo keeps rolling her sleeve and gazes at the IV with interest.

“Whatever. They love you.”

Quincy can hardly move for a full second. She thought she’d left the rage reeling
through her body back at the protests, back in the holding cell. She wonders if that, too,
would get left behind on a launch to a new world. She wonders what it would be like to
be free. “We’re taking off soon,” she says. “Let’s do it on time for once, please.”

Suo’s makes a noncommittal noise and Quincy has to brace herself against the
residual anger that rushes up, hot and ugly. The words stick, swollen, at the base of her
molars. She wants to leave, alive, intact, away. She sees Suo and the doc laughing and the
dull shine of Johanna’s walls and she wants to stay. She clenches her teeth down hard to
keep quiet. She heads up the stairs and turns a corner, fists closed.

Passing through the crew’s quarters, Quincy ascends the steep stairs, hands steady
on greasy, glimmering rails. She pops up in the commons, barely more than a kitchen and
dining room with sagging sofas bolted to the floors like a break room. Spotting
Cassiopeia Hong, a broad, squat young woman with a chip on her shoulder and a fierce
competitive edge, Quincy points her finger and keeps walking. “We’re gonna talk, you and me.”

“What—” Cassie holds up her hands in some kind of shrug, offended.

“Get us out to the airfield. I’ll be along.” Quincy’s out the door before she can wait for an answer. She knows Cassie doesn’t deserve her wrath. It doesn’t change a thing.

Two long narrow hallways lead out of the common area: One leads to the flight deck, a snug room with two identical chairs and an array of flight instruments laid-out on a sturdy switchboard. The other leads to the engine room. Just to the right of the compression block engine sits the tiny ladder that leads to a trap door in the ceiling. Eiji works and lives in the tech room most of the time, her tiny garden of fake and real plants set off to the side, spilling over.

The door slides open in a rush of stale air, blisteringly cold and smelling of battery acid. Quincy hauls herself up and into the dark room. When the portal closes behind her the last of the hangar noises get shut out for good. Quincy turns and, letting her eyes adjust, takes in the set-up the way she always does: grudgingly and impressed, always overwhelmed. She hates how the cold in the tech room unravels her, every time. She hates how she feels like sitting up here in the dark and crying. “Hey,” she says quietly.

Perched in her usual battered chair, an old leather contraption patched with duct tape and poorly executed stitches, Eiji doesn’t so much as swivel, much less look up, to greet Quincy. It takes a complete walk-around to grab a chair from the stack of mismatched seats and parking it at a close angle to see her. Eiji looks frail against the
large frame of her chair, long dark hair falling around her like the wires that clutter the tables spread out before her. As usual, Quincy is hit with the chemical mill smell Eiji can’t seem to shake. “Hey,” the girl replies. It had taken nearly a year to get her to respond to salutations. Gregor’s wife, Talla, had been largely responsible for that trick.

“Wanted to check in before we took off.”

“Hmm.”

“So?”

Eiji’s room at the top of the rover houses an inventory of computer equipment that the other crews have all vocalized as extraneous: camera feeds, tracking equipment, heavy hardware. An array of screens – a half dozen cobbled together like giant eyes – flashes blue and white and pulsing against the shadows. The glow is like a caress against Eiji’s pale skin. She rarely uses her optic implant on the neural interface. Suo made it clear that the Johanna crew was to accept the extra equipment and tune-ups without question but Eiji had negated any extra questions or complaints with the surveillance she put out on delivery and survey runs. Johanna had pulled the most runs without incident or accident than any other in their hangar.

“Gregor’s got a handle on the weight,” Eiji says.

Quincy shifts in the metal folding chair, the dent beneath her right thigh making her slide back too far. “Yeah, I got that.” If she shifts her vision she can still read the feeds on the rest of the crew’s work. She’s glad to see Charlie actually prepping for the run, even if Suo is still down for the count.

“Good,” Eiji replies, but her voice is distant, wispy. Her permanent state of distraction has taken Quincy long enough to get used to. Quincy looks around again at the
state of the room. Eiji had somehow enlisted Gregor’s help in dumpster diving and
stealing from heavy bulk trash pick-up sites around the lockdown cities. “Can I help you
with something?” Eiji finally asks.

“I need to know you’ll be good to handle a long flight. We’re taking on
Shenzhou’s slack, pulling a multi-city run,” she says. A direct statement usually works
best, despite the nearly always obtuse replies.

“I was the one who sent you the update.” Eiji finishes typing a command into a
long row of coding and swivels to face Quincy. She is barefoot and clad in a long,
wrinkled T-shirt, a bright cartoon character with blue hair and red eyes staring forlornly
out at Quincy. “I’m fine,” she says in response to the silence that stretches too long. She
turns back to her work.

The youngest aboard the ship at eighteen, Eiji is brilliant, no one can deny it. She
showed up at the hangar one morning, headed straight for Johanna, asking for work like
a demand. She knew everyone’s names and stats and had climbed through the rover like
she knew where she was going. Suo had said, “Let her be,” and later Quincy would
wonder if it was because of the clear Nipponese accent cutting through her speech, far
thicker than Suo’s, binding. It was Quincy who had done all the official digging and
confirmations, pulling up encrypted files in Nipponese and even more in Sino. It had
taken seven neighbors to translate the different dialects, disagreeing on every fifth word
and inserting unnecessary idioms the whole time. All Quincy could substantially glean
from the files was that the psychiatric notes were extensive. The rest were almost
negligible.
“No dreams?” Quincy probes. She’s been there for the night terrors, Gregor calling in panicked from comms, the screams from the storage room audible even through the mic.

“No,” Eiji says and angles her face away.

“So you didn’t sleep at all is what you’re saying.” Eiji keeps typing, doesn’t answer. Several smaller screens show separate angles on Suo and Charlie in the infirmary. Another has Cassie slowly going through boot-up processes in the bridge. Quincy tries to stretch her neck but she can feel the leftover hangover churning like a lava flow. She watches Eiji reseat herself, one knee tucked up against her chest, the other dangling several inches from the floor. Both of her feet are bare. When she turns it is only to read Quincy’s face in a blank pass of her eyes. She takes note of Quincy’s hand rubbing ineffectually at her own neck with a lift of her eyebrow. Eiji’s focused stare grows suddenly disconcerting. Quincy rolls her eyes at the reversal of roles. “I’m fine. Suo stayed over. She wouldn’t shut up,” she says. It’s all she’s willing to offer.

Eiji folds up her other leg and nods, swiveling back to her screens. She’s never said anything but she doesn’t seem to mind anyone using her workroom to gather themselves as long as they don’t touch anything.

“You eat this morning?” Quincy asks. She makes the requisite pause, already knowing that no answer will come. Eiji’s typing is loud and staccato, quick. “I’ll have the doc or Cassie bring something. Patch us in when we hit ground. I want heavy eyes on Gregor and whatever crew he takes out, alright? It’s going to be a bloodbath one of these days.” She gets up, ready to leave. From the hatch door, Eiji’s bird-bone knees are the only part of her visible. They lean against the arms of her ancient patchwork chair.
“I need to go out today,” Eiji says suddenly. Nothing else in the room moves.

Quincy stares at the back of Eiji’s chair, dread curdling in her chest. “Why?”

Another long pause drags on until she finishes typing. “Equipment’s dying on me. Gregor won’t know what to get without me. Permission to accompany him?”

Quincy knows it is not a good idea, not on a run like today’s. Eiji has barely left her room since coming on crew, to say nothing of leaving the entire rover. She still breathes too quickly whenever Gregor invites her over for a meal at the lockdown dorms, like just the thought of the ten-minute walk in the open is too much. The world out there is a desperate, ugly place. “Why don’t we just get you visuals and keep you on comms? G can do it.”

“He can’t.” Eiji’s voice is tight.

“This isn’t a good idea.”

“I know.” Eiji’s chair swivels back and forth but does not turn around. Quincy can’t even see the back of her head. “I need to make the run.”

Quincy can feel her pulse pounding out time in her temples. She sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I’ll ask the captain,” she says and she can hear Eiji’s shuddering breath. They both know the captain won’t be thinking about Eiji’s panic attacks. Eiji begins typing again and it is a blatant dismissal. Starting down the stairs, the clatter of the closing door makes Quincy grit her teeth against the flash of pain at the base of her neck, up through her eyes. Eiji’s feed keeps moving across the Blue. Quincy bolts it down the rest of the steps blindly. Every time she passes a screens in the corridors she sees double, the texts overlapping with the Blue. Nothing about today is going to be easy and Suo is hanging out in the infirmary, shooting the shit with an IV in her arm.
Pausing outside the bridge door, Quincy rotates her head restlessly, neck straining. The heat from the hangar pushes down oppressively. She turns just in time to see Charlie at the foot of the stairs, grinning, syringe in hand.

“E sent me. Tension headache?” Her voice is far too cheerful.

Quincy stares at the middle ground between their bodies, nostrils flared, until she can speak without taking anything out on the doctor. “Pass,” she says finally. “I’ll live. Save it for your next survey run.” The last time Charlie pitched her first aid tent, the line stretched out for blocks.

Charlie hesitates, visibly thrown. “It’s not often I get a message from E,” she says.

Quincy rolls her eyes and grits her teeth, regretting, when her vision dips and flashes around the Blue interface. “She is not your superior and I have adequate enough verbal abilities to request your skills myself, doctor.”

“Well…” Her face dips and stretches in different patronizing mouses. “You message me if it gets worse,” she says finally. Charlie Hong is a giant but when she swings from side to side, Quincy sees too much of Clarence, childlike, optimistic, and it throws her, almost makes her want to apologize. “I’m glad E’s talking to you again,” the doctor teases.

The moment is gone like that. “Lift off in five,” Quincy says. She starts to walk away only to be halted by the doctor’s timid throat clearing.

“Also, if it’s not too much trouble…” The doctor starts too many of her sentences that way. Quincy respects Charlie too much to let her irritation show but nothing about this day is going smoothly. None of this is even her job. “I wanted to know if you had a chance to get through last month’s reports yet.”
“You had a good half hour with the captain. Why –”

Charlie turns a fatal shade of red and shakes her head so hard Quincy worries, bites down on her lip to keep in the tirade. “Sorry. I – no, sorry. I just –”

It would be so easy to blow up at the young doctor, to coax out those ready tears, to get everyone to back off and report to their actual captain for once instead of Quincy who’s only supposed to be flying the damn ship. “You turned in good work,” Quincy says slowly, her only concession to her cooling temper. “No one’s blaming you on the missing supplies, so stop.” She sighs out, emptying out her air. “Go sit with E if you’ve got nothing better to do. Better yet, feed her. She’s going out on the run, I need her prepped.”

“Really? Why? We can just send Cass.”

“No way. You’re going with E to keep her from spiraling out. We need little Hong up front with us. Go get E prepped.”

“…Cass isn’t going to like this.”

“Not your business.”

No one ever listens to just the pilot. The doctor follows Quincy into the bridge, practically skipping, approaching her younger sister with more exuberance than either Quincy or said sister knows how to handle. Quincy scratches her neck, digging in her nails. (Leave, she thinks. I could just leave.) Cassie flinches away, batting at Charlie’s arms open for a hug, and keeps trying to work the screens with Eiji’s secondhand feeds passing by, bright blue.

“Out, doc,” Quincy says loudly. She hauls Cassie up by the collar and takes the lead seat in front of the long panel of controls and buttons and two evenly spaced rudders.
Large and impeccably coiffed, Cassiopeia Hong is as stooped by her towering sister’s stature as anyone else on crew, but it’s easy to spot the resemblance in their honed intellects and gorgeous faces. Cassie’s is currently pulled in a sour moue. “What happened to letting me pull more solo runs?”

Quincy can’t look at anyone, voice going monotone to get through it all. The pain in her head screams. “Your rights are revoked until everyone stops asking me to keep you off the warpath about the past three survey runs. Are we clear?”

Cassie’s first target is her own sister who holds her hands up as though to show they are clean and exaggeratedly pulls her lower lip down, devastated. Cassie rolls her eyes, a habit she picked up from too many training sessions with Quincy’s wrath. “Gregor’s such a wimp.”

“He’ll take you when you’re ready. It’s his decision and the captain’s.” Both Hongs make murmurs of dissent. “I will fire both of you. Doc, get out of my bridge or I’m grounding you for this flight. Gregor can deal with E if you won’t. We’ve got training to do.” After the doctor leaves, pouting, Quincy gives Cassie a pointed look. She says, “She’s your sister, you know, ingrate.”

Cassie barely looks up from her screens. “That she is.”

The headache has begun to throb, shuddering Quincy’s vision off course. She’s your fucking sister, she wants to spit. All she sees is red, red. Quincy breathes slow and deep.

“What are you doing?” Cassie asks. “Let’s go, come on. Jeeze.”

Quincy takes a last breath. Through the windshield the runway stretches out beneath a blue sky. She thinks about breaking through the clouds, hitting atmo and
rushing out into the dark of space. Leaving everyone behind is the privilege so many others had. Quincy is just another person among millions who were left behind. It makes her want to leave the craft and leave the rudder to Cassie, to walk back to the dorms and lock herself in the apartment with Clarence, to explain everything about what happened to the world to him and cry. Instead, she breathes out, eyes dry.

“Alright,” she says. “Take-off in five, four, three, two…”

In the air, swathes of evacuated cities, clusters of buildings, pass below like giant graveyards. Cassie keeps to herself, more angry than cowed, and Quincy flies true. The captain doesn’t show up for a check-in. In a few weeks, Quincy thinks, Cassie might be ready to fly solo full-time. The crew wouldn’t miss me, then. Launch, she thinks. Could I really launch?

At the first drop-off, everyone unloads together to ready the station for rations trade-offs. The Pro-V factories are just barely being kept afloat by the original workers and their original supervisors. The protein vitamin tins require basic components that factory’s had stockpiled for years, but even those supplies have to come to an end soon. The lightening of each delivery load has not been missed. Soon there may not be rations. (Nobody dares mention that soon there won’t even be residents.)

Suo only nods distractedly when Quincy informs her of Eiji’s proposed supply run. The spark of irritation that hits Quincy curls tight in her shoulder blades. “She shouldn’t go, captain,” she says quietly.

“She wouldn’t be asking if she thought someone else could do it.”

“You know that’s not true.”
“Tell her permission granted,” Suo says. She leans against a stack of boxes, arms folded, panting. “You don’t give her enough credit.”

Quincy thinks of Eiji’s small frame clutched in hyperventilation, fingers and toes locked in gnarled claws from her erratic breathing, her whole body shuddering so hard she can’t keep her seat. “You’ve never been there for one of her attacks.”

Suo doesn’t flinch at the accusation. The box she hands Quincy digs deep, each corner sure to leave bruises where they sit on her skin. “Shenzhou’s down, along with three other rovers that may not survive repairs. We need her tech. No one on this crew’s getting maimed because we didn’t keep good enough eyes on the crowds.”

Everyone looks up when Eiji comes down the staircase and into the cargo hold. Gregor is the first to cry out, exuberant as always, one arm held high in the air in greeting, “Yo! Look who’s up and about and in a whole new area of the ship!”

“And it is truly thrilling,” Eiji says, but it is through clenched teeth. Her steps are careful and slow as she descends each step. Her grip on the rail makes her knuckles glow white. She hasn’t even bothered to change out of her ratty knee-length t-shirt, the blue-haired girl on the front eternally smiling.

Looking at Eiji always makes Quincy’s shoulders tighten, stressed, concerned. “Pants, maybe?” Quincy says, exasperated. “Pants?”

Gregor’s the one who moves forward first and quickest, laughing. “We should have a sign,” he declares, wrapping an arm around Eiji as she steps onto the ground level. “Like those workplaces with, like, number of days without workplace accidents, only it will be number of days without Eiji on the floor. We’ll do ghost tours only it will be to find you!”
“Nobody is laughing. Do you know why?” Eiji’s feet are clad in factory-regulation steel-toe boots. She shakes off Gregor’s arm, looking like a time bomb, holding herself together, tightly wound.

Gregor keeps step with her, deliberately shortening his long strides. “Talla would laugh and that is what matters. Speaking of whom, now that you have already left your room, why don’t we make it a banner day and you can come sleep in the dorms and my magnanimous wife will even cook for you. Two to three whole meals of roughly the same taste and texture.”

“What a bribe,” Quincy says, joining them as they pass. “Where are your pants?” Truthfully, she is thankful for Gregor and Talla’s devotion to keeping tabs on Eiji as much as she does. Someone has to.

“If it didn’t work, I wouldn’t keep offering,” Gregor says. “We’re gonna have fun today. Dumpster diving, right?”

“Maybe pants?” Quincy suggests again.


Eiji says nothing. She stands between them, rigidly planting one foot in front of the other like the effort it takes is meant to leave cracks in the concrete. The doctor swoops in from behind, holding out a pair of extra scrub bottoms, spotted with daffodils. “Here we go.”

“What is that?” Gregor asks in horror but Eiji’s already began undoing her boots, shoving each leg into the flowered monstrosities. “Why do you smell?”

“Make T make her shower,” Quincy suggests.
“Just give me some kind of signal if you need to go back to the ship when we’re out there,” Charlie says. “I know you can do this.”

Suo, left alone with her stacks of boxes and an unhelpful Cassie, puts her hands on her hips, shouting, “Are you all going to swaddle her while you’re at it? We’ve got work to do, people.”

The doctor tries to put a hand on Eiji’s shoulder but Eiji, despite her shallow breathing, is still as alert as ever, jerking away before Charlie can get anywhere near touching distance. Shakily, she wipes at her own forehead, though there is no sweat to see. Her hands open and close at her sides. She starts to speed up her pace, distancing herself from her escorts. “Stop,” she says.

“She’s fine,” Quincy says at the look on the doctor’s face. “Can you say the same for the captain?”

Charlie grins, her corkscrew black curls falling forward when she tilts her head from side to side. “Medically speaking.”

“Boxes aren’t going to move themselves!” Suo shouts and Gregor goes at a jog. Quincy catches up to Eiji with a few doubled steps and pushes at the back of the tech’s head. She leaves her hand cradled to her skull when it rebounds. “Hey,” she says.

It takes a few seconds but Eiji shudders only once. “Hey,” she says back. She pushes the back of her head further against Quincy’s hand. Quincy drops it to squeeze the girl’s shoulder once, twice.

Gregor and the doctor head out for the dump on foot, Eiji diminished between their two towering bodies. The rations station is noisy with the usual tenant complaints about low supplies and the even louder objections to the doctor’s absence. Suo is better at
dealing with these things but today the glances she keeps shooting at Quincy feel too much like a burden. Any other day and she would step up. She would do what is asked, the way she always has. But today Quincy does not want to be here, does not want to be anywhere on this planet. She does not want to be needed like this and still feel like she is doing absolutely nothing while the world goes to shit. She fights to keep her eyes open through the pain that’s exploded, a slow lava trickle across her forehead, spreading out in rapid fire drumbeats. She counts breaths like Eiji and thinks about how easy it could be to just leave, to be done with the burden of thousands of people and their time left on Earth.

The deliveries go off with the usual hitches: scuffles and yelling, thefts and accusations, Johanna’s engine room threatening collapse, the crew struggling beneath the accusations in the eyes of the starving and the sick. By the end of the day, Quincy hasn’t had a chance to see how Eiji’s runs in each city for new tech has gone. Her head is a livewire of pure pain, raw and ceaseless.

“I swear to everything you believe in, one more nick on this rover and I will…I will…” The threats get more slurred with each word. A burning sweat has broken out across Quincy’s entire back. “I will make you clean Eiji’s room. You will be in charge of all her meals.”

Cassie doesn’t seem particularly impressed but she takes over the controls quietly. “Yes, okay,” she says.

“Don’t you patronize me,” Quincy spits. She hates to lower the stock but Eiji’s room has been locked since she got back from the last room and the cold and dark are usually the only thing that can assuage Quincy’s headaches otherwise. She stumbles down to the infirmary, her whole body a bolt of singing nerves. Suo has to practically
catch her when she gets through the doorway, looking tired, dropping the clipboard in her hands that looks full of unaccounted-for inventory.

“You know,” Quincy murmurs, clutching Suo’s forearms. “If you would just use the Blue like everyone else…” She can’t finish the sentence. She loses the thought.

“You’re hopeless,” the doctor proclaims, guiding Quincy to an exam table. The room spins. A needle is sunk deep. Quincy falls asleep, resentful and aching. When she wakes it is to Suo’s stupid, unconcerned face and the rhythm of the stethoscope in the captain’s hand beating against a tabletop in time to what may be Beethoven’s Fifth.

Suo holds up a hand in greeting. “You’re awake. Doc’s up keeping her sister company. Want me to get her down here?”

“We didn’t crash,” Quincy determines, throat cracking.

Chuckling, Suo holds out a cup of water. “That worries me. Aren’t you supposed to be teaching her?”

Quincy sighs. Her body feels too light from the medicine and she can’t seem to eke out saliva, her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth. She’s too groggy to sit up and drink. “How far out are we?”

“Not too much longer now, maybe another hour.”

Quincy tries to figure out what their ETA had been before she’d left the bridge. “We’re so late,” she says, thinking of Clarence’s growling stomach and Jack’s non-existent cooking skills.

“G doesn’t want us hitting normal speed until we can get some things checked out. We might get grounded soon unless we can get some new parts.”

“Shit.”
“He’s probably exaggerating.” Suo snuffles. “Think you can put in the filework?”

Quincy starts to slowly sit up. She looks at the captain, unsteady and slow. Awake for all of thirty seconds and still heavily nauseous, the impotent anger comes roiling back, shooting through her veins more quickly than anything the doc could hook to an IV. “No. The factory’s barely hanging on. Tell Gregor to see what he can pull from the dumps.”

“It’ll take, like, two minutes, Q.”

“Then you put in the filework. Just let me rest for two seconds. What’s your problem?”

“What, do you need an enema too?”

“Fuck you,” Quincy says. Something breaks. “Fuck you. You do it. That is your job.” The words come out like blades and she can taste the blood on her tongue. She can’t take them back. “You ever stop and think about what your crew is going to be like without me around?”

“Hilarious. You think you caught that bug that was going around—”

“This is not a joke. When’s the last time you even read anyone’s reports? Their files? You don’t even use the Blue. When is the last time you even logged in?”

“Thank you for this lesson in responsibility, but fainting takes it a little far —”

“What do you think is going to happen if our rover goes down too? Pro-V productions are not forever, and there are people out there that sure as hell need the doc—”

Suo is still smiling. She’s used to Quincy’s temper, used to treating it like a joke. “I am the one who got us on this crew. Relax. Don’t act like I don’t know what we’re doing.”
“Then do your goddamn job!”

It could end there, the air cracking and sparking but no outright explosions to contain. Suo backs down enough to say, “You need to sleep this off. We had a rough night. But you know if you would just talk about—”

“This isn’t about Chelsea,” Quincy says. She sees the same flash of red, gore and open eyes. “Not everything is, okay? Can you just—” She cuts herself off, shaking from the effort of holding herself together. “I am not this person. I don’t like being this angry, stressed-out person. I followed you because you had a plan and look where we are. We’re just waiting to die.”

Suo lifts an eyebrow, studying Quincy. “Funny, the way I saw it, you followed me like a tiny puppy and I got us both safe and fed for the past three years. Just in time to support your baby.”

Quincy’s heart turns to steel. “Clarence deserves better. I’m going with Jack to find something else. Something better.”

“Jack?” Suo says and, even if Quincy’s learned not to take the bait from her ex she’s still fighting the same fights with Suo, three years later.

“Quit it. You have zero reason to be upset with him. I am the one he fucked and impregnated so can you just—”

“Where the fuck are you going with Jack? Are you getting back together?”

“Yes, I’m taking leave to elope, that’s really it.”

Suo’s smile has been slowly fading. It drops now, entirely. “What, like you never ran away before, just out of the blue, right when people needed you?”
It is worse than a physical blow. Quincy hadn’t even slept in the same room as her sister the night before she left the hostel. She hadn’t take a last look and there definitely hadn’t been a goodbye. But she had come back. She came back. “Don’t. Don’t you dare. I came back and fought your stupid war for you so can you just give me this? So my son doesn’t die on this stupid planet?”

“Oh my God,” Suo scoffs, eyes widening in disbelief. She doesn’t need Quincy to have to say it. She hadn’t been the leader of multiple protests for nothing. “You’re chasing a launch?”

Quincy drinks from the forgotten cup of water, but doesn’t avert her eyes. She tells herself that Suo has never had a close family, that she could never understand. Suo gave up on a launch the night Chelsea died, the night they were jailed. So much for justice.

“Q. Don’t be fucking stupid. What is Jack getting you into?”

The doctor’s kept her collection of Quincy’s paper animals in a line along a far counter. At the very edge of one corner sits a complicated origami unicorn, faded pink, its tiny nose pressed to a first aid kit. Quincy traces the image of it in her head, its horn and bent legs, so she doesn’t have to think of Chelsea’s eyes always sitting so bright in Clarence’s face. He’s never had her disposition but then he has her jawline, even her reckless laugh when tickled hard enough. Chelsea wouldn’t have understood the pregnancy, but she would have loved Clarence. In all the never-ending what-if games she and Suo play day after day, together or alone, she knows this deeply, irrevocably. Clarence deserves so much better than Chelsea’s issues and a world with no hope of survival.
“I told you I don’t know anything yet. But if there’s a chance it’s real, I’m going to check it out.”

“Nobody wants us up there, Q.”

Quincy’s face contorts before she can help it. The callouses on her hand chafe when she runs her palm over her mouth, wanting to hold the words back. “It was just a resource thing, right? So it wasn’t personal. And maybe it’s been long enough. Maybe someone finished a ship – ships. If no one’s coming back for us, then isn’t it better we found our own way? Wasn’t that the whole point of –” She can’t say it. In her dreams, Chelsea dies every night, relentless and cold.

Suo gets up too quickly, her feet grazing and overturning her discarded boots. The laces lash out like whip strikes. “That is not it and you know it. What about the rest of us? So, what, you’re just leaving? Is that it? We fight a fucking war together and you’re going to leave us so you can finally be a perfect family? Is that what this is about?”

“Oh my God, what is your problem? The war is over. It’s been over! And Jack and I have been over for a long time too! This isn’t about… We all have to launch. That’s it. This is just something we are checking out and if it’s good then we all get to go up before everything on this fucking planet has gone completely to shit. What the hell is wrong with that?”

Suo makes a start for the door, stops, starts again. “You don’t even know what you’re getting into.”

“It is a hell of a lot better than what we have now.” Quincy’s up now, too, shaky and aflame with rage. “This isn’t going to last.”

When Suo actually starts to leave, Quincy gives in. “Suo,” she says.
“It’s Captain,” Suo says in a suddenly hushed voice, husky with pain. “If that’s how you’re going to be about this, then we’re done. The only reason you’re making such a fuss about this is because you know that I need to fill out the filework for your leave. As your captain.”

Quincy has to cough out the laugh, the sound strangled. “Oh, fuck you. You think anyone cares about the filework? No one is reading the goddamn filework. It’s all falling apart, don’t you get it?”

“And if Jack’s special launch doesn’t exist? Just like all the rest of the launches that never existed at all?”

“So what?” Quincy says, disgusted. “At least I’m trying.” The stand-off is so familiar, the bite and crackle of shared rage and so the thoughts that come are always the same. Quincy allows herself to think the most poisonous thought she’s kept from the start, the words she’s been too good – too mature – to use against her oldest friend: You should have saved her. It should have been you.

“Great plan. I look forward to you coming crawling back to wait to die with us.”

The veins stand out in Suo’s jaw and throat where she clenches down hard and ugly. This shouldn’t be this hard to talk about. It shouldn’t be this hard to say that…

“That’s right, captain,” Quincy corrects acridly, spitting out the word. “On my belly, over glass, just for your sorry ass.”

…that Quincy is scared shitless.

“Q, just shut the fuck up.” Suo always needs the last word.

It was always going to be like this, Quincy thinks. We should have never been on crew together. It’s just more Nasibs leaving and leaving and leaving – leaving Suo alone,
again, always. Quincy knows that is what Suo thinks. She’s not sure she can tell Suo she’s wrong.

The pain blossoms in acid colors. Quincy is pretty sure she is about to throw up. She smoothes her hair back and pushes off the examination table, feeling too hot. She wonders if Charlie has a miracle drug for this kind of heartbroken stress, for bitter friendships and hopeless living. She wonders if this is how Chelsea felt towards the end, when she was brittle and breaking, lashing out and falling insensible in equally erratic bursts. Wonders if she looks just like her sister with her disbelieving laugh and the burning dead eyes that always told Quincy that Suo had gone the wrong way about something with Chelsea again. Always again. They were not perfect either. She knows Suo doesn’t dare remember it the way it really was.

“You can fly your own damn rover,” Quincy says. “I’m taking leave and if anyone comes asking, you get to give them any answer you want.” Suo looks to ready to keep fighting but Quincy doesn’t know how much longer she can hold out without saying the worst things, the thoughts that come darkly every anniversary of Chelsea’s death.

“Am I dismissed, captain?” She hates herself for staying there, for waiting for an answer.

Looking every bit her age, Suo can’t even look at Quincy when she mumbles, tired and lost, “Dismissed.”

Avoiding the captain is easy despite how small the rover actually is, although there are few places for Quincy to go. The crew dorms are essentially windowless cells and make her feel crazy. The engine room is not an option; Quincy could already feel the throttle being plugged too hard and there is no question it is because the ship is cruising
at a higher altitude than normal. Cassie still hasn’t learned. The tech room is also out now that Eiji has locked herself down.

By the time Quincy makes it back to the cockpit, teeth gritted and shoulders hunched, she kicks Cassie out gruffly, telling her to go help her sister check on Eiji. She knows they won’t succeed but she needs both sisters out of her hair. Quincy is achy and tired and done with this lifestyle, done with the fighting. Most of all, she is done with being allowed to fly away but always, always being made to return.

“How’s your head?” Charlie asks tentatively, standing in the doorway. As usual, Cassie hasn’t bothered to wait for her, booking it to the engine room.

Quincy shakes her head. “Out, doc,” she says. It doesn’t come out nearly as gentle as she wants. She settles in her seat, easing the controls back into manual. The windshield opens up with wide, glassy arms. The sky and land merge in the darkness, only black. Quincy looks at her box of ratty yarn and the box of crocheting needles beneath the control panel. Her grandmother taught her and Chelsea together. She smelled of old wool left to dry in quiet streets and made stern faces when her grandchildren’s head scarves were too bright for her tastes. Neither girl was allowed to talk as their tiny fingers made sticky knots in the strands of yarn. The wooden practice needles rubbed callouses into their fragile skin. A year later only Quincy moved on to knitting. A year after that Nimala passed away with little fuss, a cold body beneath warm sheets.

In a border around the hole in the ground at the public cemetery, Quincy watched the box of ashes lowered into the ground. All she could think was that there was no room left on Earth for whole body burials. Nimala had taught her that. The dead just stacked up higher and higher on top of one another, an exact mirror of the endless apartments and
ramshackle houses built wall-to-wall on every street, in life. “Don’t get old, beti,” she would warn Quincy with a serious face. Her knitting needles clacked even as she stared the girl down.

Quincy couldn’t breathe through the tears, looking down at the hole in the tiny box. Earth was all filled up and she was getting older, hurtling toward death with every second. It made her cry harder. Chelsea shifted closer, knowing and not knowing. Her shoulder touched Quincy’s as Nimala’s remains disappeared from sight.

“Don’t get old,” Quincy told her sister later that night. Chelsea, sitting up in bed and reading, smiled and quirked her head from across the room. The touchpad in her lap glowed with a wall of text from her latest read. “Don’t get old,” Quincy said again and meant Don’t die, don’t die. Please don’t die.

The waves of launches after the war contained the only people in the history of Earth who could truly leave the dead behind and move on with life. Quincy concentrates on the fuel gauge with its dark numbers and indicator beads. The radars sweep off in spinning lines, revealing empty skies. On the camera feeds she sees Suo lying still in the infirmary. (She knows Suo isn’t asleep. The captain has rested in fits and starts since that tiny apartment with the one window where Quincy found her and Chelsea, after the war. The slightest noise still wakes the captain when she does drift, and she only closes her eyes fully in the sunlight. Suo still refuses to touch any sedatives.) Quincy hates that she knows too much, everything, thirteen years from that burning day they all met, the Nasibs and the fiery woman with big talk about the new laws. She hates that she knew Suo before the crow’s feet and white hairs, when she was just a stranger girl falling so hard,
so stupidly for Quincy’s own equally moronic big sister. She’s about to go into auto and put her head down when --

The rover shudders.

Quincy is flung hard to the left, falling from her seats and onto the ground. There is an audible crunch and scrape against the ship. She gets up and the movements are automatic, assessing injuries, glancing at the controls, readying for a fight with the unknown. Shaken, the only thing she can think is that she’ll never live this down from Cassie for all that she lectured her on the girl’s first scrapes. She regains her seat and buckles in.

The rover shudders suddenly, violently once more. Quincy slams her hands onto the dashboard, scrabbling for the controls for the screens above the cockpit…but Eiji’s down for the count tonight. They’re only twenty minutes from the hangar. Could it really be another delivery crew heading out this late? The rover startles one last time and then, through the windshield, Quincy watches as a streak of fire and metal flies past, bright red. It bursts through the darkness and fades just as quickly.

Dumbly, she remembers how she could see the life leave her sister’s body. Remembers Suo’s crumpled face when they both looked back and saw Chelsea’s fallen body. Now, just like then, Quincy can’t tear her eyes away. A hand to the console to ground her, she watches the appearance of the starlit sky beyond, beautiful and dangerous and decaying, and it is not a sight she can handle any better than Chelsea’s gasping blood. That awful stretch of moonlight and velvet black goes on and on.

“Shit,” she says to no one at all. “Shit.”
The rest of the crew has already begun plugging in their audio to the bridge’s feed. Their overlapping voices stream in with unanswerable questions, close as Quincy’s own thoughts: *Q, everything okay--? felt something – did we – hit?—is the captain--?*

Quincy’s fingers itch and tighten. It’s always the same: Something happens and the first thing she wants to do is tell Chelsea, to see – to *know* her reactions. Each button slides wetly beneath her sweating palms. “Everything’s okay,” she tells the crew. They’re not Chelsea, none of them. They can’t be. “We’re okay.”

She cuts the feed. She hears in her head, *Beti, beti...* and it is not something she has thought of since she saw the mass graves set aflame, all those fallen rebels crumbling, crackling. Chelsea was somewhere in there, sweltering. Dead.

*Beti.*

The thought is like smooth pages with strange writing in Nimala’s bedroom, the stink of burning pyres, and the start and end of something awful, yet again.

The thought comes clear and frightening. *Shenzhou* had gone down. *Rogue rovers.*

Quincy plugs into the infirmary comms and hates her own hesitation. “Captain,” she says. “You better get up here.”

“She’s never going to let you go,” Jack had said, so many times before, because he knew it would hurt. It didn’t make it any less true.

Quincy waits, as she always does, for Suo’s next command.
03. Gregor

“Maybe you should talk to her,” Charlie says from the corner of the engine room, where she’s holed up with a battalion of small paper and crocheted animals.

Gregor moves Eiji by the shoulders when her lap intersects with his work area, setting her on her way again around the room, eyes lit up bright blue. “Pass,” he says when he can see the doctor again.

“She’s not doing so well,” Charlie says in that oblique way she has, voice edging up in part plea, part question.

“She’s a wreck,” Eiji clarifies. Her hands swipe through the air like she’s forgotten she doesn’t need them to type. An old headset sits around her neck, the wires caught in her tangled hair. Gregor swats at her when she gets too close again, peering at the engine parts like she wants to try to do Gregor’s job.

“Stop it,” he says to her. To Charlie he adds, “That is not my business. That is the captain’s and so, by default, it is Q’s.” Eyes sunk in the Blue, he stubbornly continues reading through Shenzhou’s schematics. Glancing out past the feed he can still see the way Eiji’s shoulders tense at the mention of Quincy. It’s been three weeks, the longest she’s gone without eyes on every one of their workers since coming on crew. Gregor is not blind. He sees the way the doc looks down at all the handiwork on those stuffed animals. He knows Eiji and the captain aren’t the only ones feeling the loss.

Charlie says, “The captain is not a wreck.” It does not come out convincing. Frowning, she launches a paper bird at Gregor and makes tiny cawing noises until the bird crashes on the floor.
“Do we all have to do this in here?” Gregor asks. He steers Eiji around so she does not crush the paper bird under her bare feet.

Ever since Johanna’s rogue rover sighting, all ships have been temporarily grounded. Quincy took a sudden leave without telling anyone and left the captain to make her excuses. Suo refuses to discuss the context surrounding her pilot’s absence, citing “personal circumstances” over and over again and pulling rank whenever anyone pushes too hard. In the meantime, the hangar’s captains and some of the factory officials have been meeting to discuss the supply shortages and what to do if a rover is attacked or boarded by the supposed rogues. The only reason anyone can think of for interference is piracy: stealing of rations and medical supplies. Then again, no one’s been boarded yet.

Charlie moves around yarn animals, making them dance. When she looks up she makes a truly sad face. Gregor bends down to pick up the paper bird and throws it back; it flies true. “Stop worrying,” he says, trying for apologetic. “Suo is not a small child in a wet diaper. She will be fine.” He twists half his mouth up in a smile when she giggles.

“She is not fine,” Eiji says loudly from the other side of the room.

“Hey. You don’t visit her either,” he accuses. It’s a low blow. It’s still fairly excruciating for Eiji to leave the ship.


Gregor focuses his thoughts back on Shenzhou’s schematics to keep the Blue working. The craft has been decommissioned and everyone is concerned the same malfunctions will soon be inevitable in each of the other rovers. That is the least of everyone’s problems though, what with the mysterious rogue rovers. The factory itself is running on its last legs, too. Soon the remaining workers will be lower on rations since
anyone has been before the war. Gregor cannot allow himself to think about what will happen to everyone in the dorms once the Pro-V stops being produced. He looks over *Shenzhou's* malfunctions instead.

 Abruptly, Charlie announces, “You know, Cass made the captain drink with her the first night. It wasn’t good. The captain just talks in Nipponese and Pretends she’s not crying and then she falls asleep. Everywhere.” If it’s supposed to be a prompt to get Gregor to go play house with the captain it is a poor one.

 “So don’t make her drink.” Gregor pushes at Eiji’s arm gently when she veers too close to the open control panel. “Can you just sit somewhere and be still? You are going to fall through that door there and fall on the engine and die.” Eiji pushes back with her bare foot and goes to sit next to Charlie, going down ungracefully.

 “What a crochety man,” the doctor says. She shows Eiji the purple cephalopod she balances off her fingertips and makes bubbling ocean noises. Eiji shoves the animal so it plummets from the doctor’s hand.

 “This is my work area. Yours is probably just as empty,” he gripes, knowing it will do absolutely nothing to bring blessed silence back to the engine room. With the ships grounded everyone’s gotten restless with too much time to think about the future of the runs and the factory, the possibility of safety coming to an end yet again. Eiji has taken to avoiding her own room at the top of the shuttle, haunting Gregor’s workplace and even the commons most days. Most of the crew has been coming in during the days despite having no work to do. Cassie pretends to study her half-finished lessons with Quincy on piloting. Gregor tinkers with the engine room despite lacking anything useful to do any actual repairs. The doctor sits with Eii and seems to think all the interaction is
progress from Eiji’s usual hermitage, but Gregor knows nothing has really changed. It may be minimally better than Eiji holing up and dropping down, foregoing the ladder entirely, every time the anxiety seizes her, but the truth is that Eiji is simply too scared to be alone. The fact that it’s especially because Quincy is gone goes unsaid.

Gregor peers through the Blue interface and frowns. “Is that a snake biting off a bear’s dick or is the snake supposed to be his penis?”

Eiji stares down very seriously at where Charlie is perfecting her set-up of yarn animals. “Neither,” Charlie says lightly. “It’s fellatio.”

Gregor raises both eyebrows. He’s seen the doctor’s blog before and takes it in stride. “But you can see how it could be misconstrued.”

“That’s your reaction?” Eiji asks, examining the tiny ponies Charlie places in her lap as a distraction.

“I can,” Charlie says. “I guess it can be his penis.”

“Why is this happening here?” Gregor asks again.

“That’s your question?” Eiji asks. She throws a pony at Gregor’s shin.

Charlie’s eyes go aquamarine and she snaps the picture, her whole body pressed to the ground for a close-up shot of the bear and his snake phallus. “It makes an interesting backdrop.”

Gregor sees it upload on her active feed in the Blue, off to the side. “Does your sister know you do this? Are you aware the world is ending?” he asks ruefully.

“It is what the alien civilizations will find millions of years from now,” Eiji says, assessing the pile of crumpled, colorful beasts and tentacles.
“You’re right, this isn’t working,” Charlie decides. She catches a look at Gregor’s face and she must finally see something behind the half-hearted joking because she pats at Eiji’s shoulder and says, “E, pick some animals. We’ll try something else.” While she oversees Eiji’s pickings, she attempts one final plea. “Come with us to visit her tonight. We can’t fly without her.” She twists her lips, shakes her head. “This whole week she’s been saying that everyone on ship prefers Q in charge…”

It is not what Gregor is expecting to hear; he is pretty sure the captain put Q in charge of everything in the first place when the crew first got put together. But Charlie has not been on crew long and she still gets stars in her eyes over Suo’s loquacious praise. He sighs and says, “Clearly not true if you have time to do this while Q’s on leave.” It is better than saying he misses Quincy and the stick up her ass, too.

Eiji props an elephant and a unicorn on the floor near Charlie’s knees. “Point,” she agrees. “Use these.”

“Not the point.” Charlie throws the unicorn back at her. “You like Q.”

“I like no one. Why don’t you ever use the unicorn?”

“It’s too obvious. You don’t like me?”

“No,” Eiji says decisively. Charlie makes kissy faces at her and grins.

“Please,” Gregor says flatly, half sunk in the Blue. He shakes his head. “I am trying to do work. Go upstairs. Shoot your porn in the dark.”

The doctor draws in a truly offended gasp. “This is art,” Eiji says facetiously before Charlie can even get to it. “How dare you.” Eiji pushes the doctor out the corridor towards the commons, rerouting her from the dark, cold, empty tech room before the doctor can even realize it.
Gregor watches their retreating backs. He knows Eiji is far from okay. From the beginning the captain and Quincy had given the crew a brief rundown on Eiji’s medical history, right after her first and last night sleeping in her own dorm. She requested leave to spend her nights on the ship directly after, looking so torn up and pale, not meeting anyone’s eyes, that Gregor distrusted her. Nobody knew the correct way to react. When the captain poked around all she could find from the woman Eiji had bunked with was that Eiji had spent the night in the bathroom, door closed, lights on. She thought Eiji had been sick. Gregor remembered pre-war drug addictions and wondered. Nobody knew about the attacks, not then.

The first time Eiji’s converted storage space hatch door locked mid-flight she also cut her audio, giving her reports on the newly set-up screens and in the Blue only. Charlie wrote it off as a techie thing. It was Quincy who pounded on Eiji’s door and leashed enough threats for the girl to open up. Nobody saw either woman until almost two hours later when Quincy returned to the cockpit without a single word. After that Eiji was allowed to stay on ship overnight permanently.

Gregor didn’t understand until a rare overnight run, the rovers reaching out further and further for supplies. The hatch to Eiji’s room popped open over Gregor’s workspace. Eiji forewent the entire ladder, dropping whole and ungraceful in a shaking heap. Quicksilver trembles racked her body and then tapered off as she clenched every muscle in her body, inhaling, inhaling, inhaling. Gregor rushed to her, equally panicked, his thoughts too scattered for the Blue to catch an order to alert the doctor. All Eiji said, through clenched teeth, was “It will pass. Distract me.”
“What’d Q do to help?” he asked and watched her entire face crumble, breathing accelerating.

“Next…subject,” she said.

“Want me to get the doc?”

“Not if you want to retain your Blue access for the foreseeable future.” It was a long string of words and too much effort. Eiji shuddered violently and held her breath.

Eyes wide, Gregor sat cross-legged across from the new tech and babbled, relentlessly. He talked about their strange, protest leader captain and all the gossip in the dorms about her great love affair with Quincy’s dead big sister. He talked about Q’s little boy, who sometimes stayed at Gregor and Talla’s place for babysitting. He told her about Talla, his great love, his everything, and how she had shot him the first time they’d ever met. (Gregor had been dumpster diving with a few buddies outside the city limits. All the supermarkets and warehouses had already been looted. Gregor hadn’t eaten in four days. Talla and her group had claimed the overflowing dump as their temporary grounds before heading on to a purported launch site to protest, to maybe even damage something important enough to prevent an entire launch. Talla had never pulled perimeter duty before. The man entering from her periphery was threat enough. She shot him in the shoulder. Later, in the pickup bed of the Ferrer boy’s borrowed truck, Talla nearly shot Gregor again for trying to flirt with her using nonsensical medical terms before he’d passed out from blood loss.)

Eiji doesn’t laugh but she does meet Gregor’s eyes several times, away and back, lips curving like a twitch, so he tells her about how Talla left her group to stay behind with Gregor, how they ate Pro-V that Gregor tried to spruce up with his last bottle of
sriracha, how he taught her to shoot a real gun and caught her body when it reeled with the kick and felt his heart drop squarely at this beautiful stranger’s steel-toed feet. Then, because Eiji doesn’t say anything and the engine keeps humming without a single hitch, he tells her quietly how Talla had been Tarun once, long before they ever met, flat-chested and covered in too much eyeliner they didn’t quite know how to work without stabbing at their own tear ducts. Now there are no daily hormone dosages; they were gone long ago but Gregor thinks she is gorgeous, beautiful, everything.

His struggle for words seemed to distract Eiji just enough to let her breath again, focusing less on the words and more on Gregor’s tone as she did some kind of deep breathing exercise. He thinks about telling her about his family but he feels like he’s said too much, that maybe one big, soulful secret is enough for one night. Later, when Gregor’s finishing naming every facet and part in the engine room, Eiji repeating after him as a final distraction, he tells her, “You’re gonna meet her, you know. Talla. You should. She’d like you.”

“Okay.” Eiji ran a hand through her hair, moved her feet. It would take a few more months for Gregor to figure out this was the remnants of her panic making her restless, keeping her moving and jittery. Just then, the moment is negligent, wind through a window. She stretched and got up. She headed for her ladder without another word.

“Hey,” Gregor said. He hesitated. “So, like. What is…Why does this happen?” he asked.

She didn’t even shrug, just started to hitch a foot up onto the first rung. “Just does.”
“No,” he said, sticking a hand out like trying to bridge the gap. “I didn’t mean… Not like that. Just…”

Her foot lowered. She looked so tired when she met Gregor’s eyes. She assessed him long enough that Gregor wanted to apologize, to backtrack and just take Eiji home to meet Talla, Talla who always knew what to do and what to say.

Eiji twisted her lips to one side and looked at the floor. Maybe it was because she was grateful for Gregor’s company and discretion. Maybe she was leveling the playing field after all the talk about Talla. Maybe it was just because she was new on crew and free-falling, untethered. “I can’t remember things,” she said finally. “Woke up like this. My file says I’m from Nippon.” Her tone never changed, flat and hollow. She changed tactics, eyes faraway. “You ever wake up from a dream – or just sleep really. You’re sleeping and you wake up and it takes a few seconds too long to remember… everything. You ever get that?”

Gregor thought of Talla, long limbs and knees jabbing all the wrong places, her head lolling off her pillow and onto Gregor’s, everywhere all at once. He said, “Yeah.”

Eiji hoisted herself onto the ladder, back turned. “I’m still trying to remember. Not all the time, but…” The light from her newly set-up computers streamed just past the hatch door’s opening, blue and inviting. For barely longer than a second she clung to the rungs, trembling. She shook her head and disappeared into the darkness.

Alone in his workspace Gregor keeps an eye on Charlie’s vulgar feed as she uploads more photos from the commons. Three minutes of actual silence elapse, three minutes filled with the Blue and Shenzhou and Johanna’s creaking engine. Gregor’s
interface doesn’t so much as spasm, thoughts holding steady -- until the feeds and windows start moving of their own accord, no halt or struggle to signal anything is wrong until it suddenly is, getting away from his thoughts. He isn’t surprised. Eiji’s got a nasty habit of hacking the crew’s neuroimplants to prove a point. The captain is useless about regulating the matter because she thinks it’s funny.

Pictures from Charlie’s blog dance across the screen and reconfigure to spell S-U-O in large letters speckled with colorful, vulgar animals delicately making love. The implant shuts off. Gregor thinks about Eiji struggling through her own untethered thoughts, rocketing into another attack. He thinks about the captain’s absence from the ship even with the rest of her crew visiting on this prolonged vacation. Gregor plays along because he doesn’t know what else to do.

In the commons, dozens of paper horses litter the only sofa. The “FREE” basket spills over with Quincy’s finished crafts. The biggest animals of the bunch sit in a circle atop the table looking worrisomely normal. Atop a rickety metal stool, Eiji undoes the creases on a floral-print crane and presses triangles against her palms. Gregor says, “Unless you can fix the rover with just your brain, I’m going to need the Blue back sometime. Won’t have a job without a rover.” He can’t help adding, “What are you doing?” because the doctor’s sunk in the Blue and sitting there so still. Not a single animal on the table appears to be in the throes of copulation.

“Won’t have a rover without a captain,” Eiji says just as Charlie gestures at the collection on the table and declares, “It’s us!”

“We are all naked animals,” Gregor observes. Charlie frowns. “But at least we are not fornicating.”
“Psychic fornication,” Charlie says.

“The follow-up series of photos will just be a documentation of the ensuing physical orgy,” Eiji explains. As much as Eiji put up a fight over the doc’s frequent check-ins to assess her stress, nutrition levels, sleep habits, and general anxiety, Gregor has borne sole witness to their burgeoning friendship and it is truly sickening.

“No,” Gregor says.

Eiji continues, “You might as well help us if you can’t work.”

Gregor can’t help it: he chuckles ruefully. She is like his own little sisters and it is good and bad since they are not here. The last and only time he had ever truly upset Eiji, he had suggested she talk to Charlie, or really any doctor, about her panic attacks and maybe staying off the ship until she got things more under control. The one-sided conversation quickly escalated into a wall of silence on Eiji’s part. She kept Gregor out of the Blue for a week. Gregor was then officially grounded from the ship after “someone” mixed up orders from admin.

“Suo is not that broken,” he says, meaning to placate any ruffled feathers before things got out of hand. “Give her a little more credit than that. Also, have you ever considered that no one else on ship interacts on your mercenary terms?”

Eiji turns her metal stool in circles with one foot. “No.” Charlie throws each of the crew animals back into the basket, one by one. “Go sit in the dark with the captain. Film a pornography.”

Gregor snorts, aware that his words are being thrown back at him. He watches her spinning. Eiji blinks too often these days. She won’t look much farther up than the floor. Maybe that’s the tipping point, the way this is all affecting their youngest on crew.
Gregor grew up with eight younger siblings. He’s never been good at standing his ground. Catching the last animal that Charlie throws at him, a lime green kitten, Gregor frowns down at it and sighs. He knew he’d be giving in from the start.

Suo’s apartment is at the heart of the dormitories, a vortex of rising walls and dulled noises that makes it easy to forget that there is a sky, a world, a way out. It is sadly appropriate. The captain answers the door with a small wooden box in one hand, some kind of chiseling tool clutched in the other, and each of her braids hanging down limply, brushing her shoulder blades. She is covered in saw dust but does not look particularly worse for wear. There is no circlet of yarn visible anywhere on her person. It is like a flashing sign, a dozen red flags for not okay. She purses her lips and looks Gregor up and down, a ferocious judgment. A few more seconds pass. “E send you?” she asks.

“I’ve been told to give that question a hearty no.” The scrutiny makes Gregor itch everywhere and he hates squirming any more than he has to in front of Suo, who prefers his unease. He touches at the beanie on his head, damp with sweat from the midday walk, rubs at his nose for something to do with his hands. He can’t remember how to naturally hold his hands.

Suo’s face doesn’t move. “Hmm.”

The hallway reeks of skin and sweat and too many bodies packed close. The air filtration buzzes quietly in the background. Stray wires used to connect inner rooms with the roof’s solar panels hang low like something dripping. The captain leans against the door jam and scratches one foot with the other. Gregor shifts his weight and crosses his arm. He says, “So.” The captain raises an eyebrow. He loses his momentum. “So, um.”
He thinks about his blocked Blue access and unobtainable yet sweet revenge. “You haven’t been coming into the hangar.”

“Nope.”

“Okay.” He thinks about turning around and leaving it at that. The captain is very clearly alive and functioning even if she is nowhere near the jovial, sauntering woman Gregor’s become accustomed to seeing. Eiji doesn’t have to be right all the time. But this isn’t right either. The captain’s face remains so still, not even rippling out in an approximation of teasing. Her replies are too taciturn. Suo has always moved through the hangar knowing everyone’s name, collecting smiles and hearts like precious gems, shooting the shit so long with the other people that Quincy would drag her away and then lecture her as they took flight. Johanna’s walls caught the echoes of her laughter every time Quincy rolled her eyes and pretended not to smile at the captain’s latest stories or the doc blushed at a bawdy joke. “E sent me,” he says gruffly, conceding.

“Fine, get in here,” she says, already turning away. “Close the door behind you.”

The front room is a barely lit space, big enough for a low table and threadbare cushions on the floor for seats. The air reeks of lemongrass and the old version of Chicken Pro-V, distinctly tart, but also the warm odor of wood chips and varnish fumes. A single sofa sits against the far wall, a truly repugnant shade of brown and covered in more strange wooden boxes. Suo goes back to her seat on the floor with a squat box in hand. Wooden shavings coat the low table. Mixed in with the rest is a heap of plastic and circuits, dissected so every part sits neatly next to each other outside of its shell. Gregor looks at it long enough to guess it’s the speaker system the factories used in each room to
warn of evacuations during the war. Everything else about the apartment looks otherwise pristine.

Gregor seats himself slowly, uncomfortably. He doesn’t know what he’d been expecting to find — yes, he does: holes in the wall, ripped out furniture, eight million pictures of Quincy with drawn-on moustaches, shattered glass like rough starlight on the floor — but this is not it. “What’ve you been up to, then?”

Suo gestures flippantly at the contained mess, lifts the box in her hand. “Keeping busy. Some of the other captains have been meeting to discuss the rogues so I went, too. Foisting off the doc and her sister as they darken my doorstep. Yourself?”

“Also much foisting.”

She lifts her chiseling tool in salute. “Cheers.”

Gregor says, “The doc’s overreacting.” He reaches for the speaker system and starts to hold pieces in his hand, looking at the ways they can fit together and how the captain had laid out certain parts. “You didn’t know how to put this back together, did you?” Suo scratches out a chunk of wood from the box in her hand and grins down at her carving but says nothing. “Why do you even try to take things apart?” he asks, grinning back when she moves her head and mimics Gregor talking voicelessly.

It takes another half hour of quietly working together at the table and Gregor’s legs cramping against the thin cushion seats for the captain to relax a little, enough to turn the box in her hands around for Gregor’s examination. “Are the eyes crooked enough for this to be unsellable?”
Delicately carved, tiny, peaceful people stare back, surrounded by lotus blossoms and intricate designs that intersect on the flat panels that make up each wall. It is beautiful. Gregor asks, “What the hell is that?”

“Box shrines. Used to trade ‘em when we made port in some of the cities out west but the crowds are too crazy now.” She turns to look at her design again and goes back to work. “Q’s got a huge one up in her apartment. We pulled a haul on some good wood before you and E came on crew. Admin kept most of it but the rest were scrapped so I scavenged most of it. I’m running low so this will be one of the last for a while.” Suo puts down her chisel and stretches her fingers, looking at Gregor like, See? I can talk about Q. “This is the part where you compliment my craftsmanship.”

He nods and goes back to putting the speaker back together. Some of the wires are mangled, stripped too thin. The frequency output jacks look fine, though. “Lot of things disappearing from the hangars lately. The captains talking about that, too?”

“That is not a compliment but that would be correct.”

“You don’t look too worried.”

“What do I look like?” Suo cracks her neck, first one way, then the next. Her braids move quietly across her dark shoulders and settle. The crew’s been together for what already feels like a lifetime and the captain has always been the captain, but Gregor’s only ever heard her crack jokes and order Quincy around to follow through on the real orders for the rest of the crew.

“You look weird,” Gregor says. “Are you okay?” He watches Suo nick her finger but keep carving anyway, blood smearing into the wooden grain.

“Dandy. E compiling a file on me? Tell her to make that the header: Dandy.”
“I left her with Talla. She seemed to think she was going to come with. The Hongs, too. Then you’d have three mommies.”

“My hero.”

“That sounded sincere. Anyway E’s sweet on my wife. Talla will calm her down.”

Suo’s laugh rips through the room like gunfire. She shakes her head as it fades. Gregor freezes, alarmed. “Any sacrifice E makes will always be less than noble,” Suo accedes, “but she is not sweet on your wife.”

“I have personally delivered several embarrassing and poorly worded haiku to my wife. There might as well be hearts in E’s eyes.”

“You’re an idiot but I suspect both E and your wife know it.” Suo chuckles again. “But I also suspect that is why you’re here. They want you to sit and listen to me talk about Nasibs always leaving?”

“Uhm.”

“That’s boring. Of course, I could also tell you about Hong Two’s visit and gift of toilet bowl liquor and how she vomited so hard she cried like a broken baby deer.”

“Hong Two?”

“Exhibit A: Idiocy. That was not the point of that now wasted story.”

The sparkle in Suo’s eye is painful to see. Nothing is worse than Eiji being more than right. Gregor’s been there to hear Suo drunkenly reminisce about her lost lover, Chelsea Nasib. The captain talks about Chelsea when she’s drunk, never the protests or the ships that left and never returned for those left behind.

Gregor knows what it’s like to be the one doing the leaving, so he gets it. If this is what Q needs to do, then so be it. But he and millions of others were ultimately left
behind as though they were wet garbage, as though they deserved to die. So he gets that, too, that slump in Suo’s whole body, the hollow cores of her eyes. “Do you think Quincy’s coming back?” Gregor asks because he is an idiot and because this is what he was sent to do.

Suo puts down the box and watches Gregor continue to tinker with the speaker for a while, his hands too big for the smaller nooks and crannies. “Depends,” she says finally.

Gregor tries not to roll his eyes in case it reminds the captain too much of Quincy. He sets up the punch line. “On what?”

“On if there’s a launch. They took the baby so, you know. Fifty-fifty chance really.”

“I’m pretty sure the chances are a lot worse than that,” Gregor says. Everyone talks about launches but no one’s ever seen a ship. No one’s ever launched.

“If Q was willing to check it out, the chances might be better actually.” Suo gets up, knees popping. She seats herself amidst her creations on the sofa. She changes the subject so quickly. “What’s gone missing from the hangars?”

The sawdust she stirs up makes Gregor’s eyes water. He blinks through the pain and tries to keep up with the conversation. It’s usual for him to feel off-balance in his interactions with the captain but this different, lifeless. Here, alone in her dank, workshop apartment, it’s easier to see past Suo’s front, to see the ways she ducks and evades and goes back to sauntering like she’s kept her balance all along. (Gregor had a mother once, a soft woman who raised eight children while holding down three jobs and taking the blows from a man she claimed to love. Gregor’s never seen his mother in Suo but he
knows the drill. He knows how to not dredge up ghosts.) He doesn’t know how to keep her on subject long enough to get anywhere so he takes her lead, lets it go. “No one’s talking about it too loudly but E confirmed the last shipments are a lot lower than they should be. Some parts from the downed rovers have been scavenged, I think. Pretty big stuff but I don’t know.”

“Factory’s going up,” Suo says. “We’ve been getting less trades anyway. The Pro-V won’t last.” She starts stacking her boxes one by one on the floor, appraising each slowly, clinging to their serenity. “I’ve been putting it off but we gotta talk an exit plan. You in?”

Gregor doesn’t physically reel but he feels his blood go cold, mouth suddenly dry. “What?”

“The other captains are holding their cards close but nobody’s talking about future runs at the meetings. Safe to say the trade and collection operation is folding for good. Once that’s gone it’s every person for themselves but that’s not how any of us are going to survive out there. We got E on the ship almost 24/7 so that’ll give us some security in getting out of here but…I don’t think people are just going to walk out of here looking for a new life.” It’s so easy to forget that Suo once led a revolution, organized protesters, fought for total population launches. She pulls her braids back into a single bunch and ties them off with an elastic. She sits so straight, feet apart, becoming the captain before Gregor’s eyes. He remembers his pity and feels like a fool.

“There’s not enough rovers,” he says softly and winces like a flashback to the past, watching the First Wave leave Earth in droves, leaders and scientists and nobody caring about anything except being gone.
Suo stiffens but she’s pulled herself together so tightly that she won’t be shaken. “Irony’s a bitch,” she says. “We’ll take who we can. What do you think?”

Gregor left eight siblings and his mother, but that was a long time ago. He found Talla along the way, and then all this infuriating, weirdo women aboard *Johanna*. “As long as the crew is all there, I think we’ll be good,” he says.

The captain nods. “Good.” There will be no more talks about Quincy or Chelsea Nasib, about sadness or wishing or healing. It is clear that the captain is only willing to look at what is right in front of her, the situation at hand, just the way she’s been doing since the launches ended and the protests failed. Food and shelter and living day-to-day, those are the only dreams the captain is willing to strive for these days. An escape into space is too luxurious a thought. Gregor agrees.

Suo watches Gregor hold speaker pieces in his hands, pretend to fit them together with his mind racing so quickly his every vein aches. He wonders if she senses his immobilizing alarm because suddenly something shifts, that stiff-backed posture slinking into looseness, the roguish grin he’s used to seeing around the hangar appearing like she’s just remembered something. “So anyway,” she segues masterfully.

Gregor sits at the low table, dazed, and listens to the captain recount her latest trysts with some of the women in the dorm, dangerous derring-do considering the small population and the extreme circumstances. It’s not the same without Quincy being disparaging and skulking around in the background, everything unsaid about Chelsea and unfinished business hanging stale, rotting between them. Gregor makes his excuses around the time Suo starts waxing poetic about her own prowess and married women
with weak knees. He pretends to not feel the captain’s assessing stare, the accusation that it’s the rest of the crew falling to pieces without Q. He flees.

Talla turns towards the door already smiling and Gregor can think of no better sight. “Hey, you,” she greets, touching a hand to the back of his neck in passing, leading him into the apartment. She is dark tan, long-limbed, and towers over her husband by a good six inches. Her hair is tucked under a green head scarf today, her favorite because it matches the beanie Gregor nicked from the rover’s “FREE” box. “How is the good captain?”

“Good, more or less.” He brushes a kiss against her cheek and crowds close, deflating, so they awkwardly walk in step together, his arms around her waist, until they enter the kitchenette. “And this stray?” Eiji is seated on a plastic foot stool near the stove, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders like a cape, the ends trailing on the tiled floor. She is stirring some kind of soup on the stove that Gregor knows Talla’s been saving up for crew visits. Their stock of canned goods is almost completely out. Everyone is sick of Pro-V but it’s all they’ve got.

“Cute and skittish. The norm. Less malnourished than last time but I take it that’s Charlie’s doing.”

“I am right here,” Eiji declares petulantly, even though her eyes are very clearly sunk in the Blue.

Ignoring her, he probes, “Cute?”

“You’re cute, too,” Talla reassures him. She shakes her head very shortly, assuring Gregor quietly that there’s been no incidences, no panic. The walk to the dorms
is still shaky for the tech: she still turns back to the safety of the rover more often than not, but once she’s in the room with Talla she can usually hold her own pretty well. Even when she does spiral out, Talla’s better at handling the situation than Gregor or an empty room.

“She brags about your manly eyebrows when you’re not here,” Eiji adds.

“Jealous?” Gregor asks and thinks about Suo when Eiji rolls her eyes. Everyone had imitated Quincy in jest initially until they had done it so often it became an unironic habit. “I want my Blue access back, runt. I did your dirty work.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

He tells them about his conversation with the captain over vegetable soup that is so rich in comparison to the wet Pro-V chunks that everyone eats slowly, overfull but relishing the meal. Eiji makes ambiguous noises through his recollections but doesn’t otherwise make the smartass comments Gregor expects. He suspects the food is too much of a distraction.

“You gonna be okay if we’re outta here?” he asks, knowing direct talk about her panic attacks when she’s not having one is a full-on sore spot. Eiji slurps her soup, loud and obnoxious, eyes locked with Gregor in challenge. He holds up both his hands in apology and surrender.

Crew and worker dorms are smaller than the rooms captains and admin get and so Eiji gets the single chair at the small table no one really uses, pressed against the foot of their bed in the main room. Gregor and Talla sit shoulder-to-shoulder on the rumpled covers, the tops of their heads just beneath the shelves Talla convinced Gregor to nail to
the walls, heavy with the dusty knick-knacks she hauled cross-country to remind her of home.

“Maybe we’d better have some things packed up and ready in case things go south fast,” he says, tapping his spoon around the edges of his bowl, suddenly nervous. It’s been a good two years of shelter and work and not wondering where his next meal will be found, or when. Talla touches his hand, a reprimand for the noise. “Sorry.”

Gregor gets up and piles her dishes onto his and goes to retrieve Eiji’s as well. “Captain wants you to keep a lockdown on the ship,” he tells her. “When you get back, I wanna do full checks on life support and the run suits.” His mind runs amok suddenly at the realization that they will be without the safety of the factory air filtration system. The spores off the coast are out there, infecting lungs and bloodstreams. “Shit,” he says suddenly. “Maybe we better swipe some suits from the factory floor for extras.”

Eiji takes his vacated seat on the bed next to Talla. “The factory’s got maybe another month left in her if we’re being optimistic. There’s enough whey isolate to make a watered-down Pro-V for that long and that’s the important part. Without the trades the Pro-V will be fairly tasteless and no one will be able to actually survive on it indefinitely but the basics are still there in terms of most of the life-and-death nutrients. It’ll be a fair supplement anyway if someone can find some other foodstuffs later.”

“That seems to be what the captain’s focusing on for now, anyway,” Gregor agrees. He grudgingly takes the empty seat the small table. Biting his lip, he tries to do the calculations in his head. If life support is number one on repairs now, then maybe he could…

Talla softly says, “Where would we go, though?”
When Gregor struggles for a response, still trapped in a million worries about Johanna’s internal workings, Eiji says, “We’ll be fine as long as we’re in the rover” like it’s the inarguable truth. Gregor doesn’t want to bring up his immediate thoughts at that moment. Johanna is his responsibility. He’ll get her up to code for Talla, for everyone.

“And Quincy?” Talla asks. It’s what Gregor loves about her, the way she cuts through the bullshit, but it still pierces, making him flinch.

“We didn’t talk so much about Q,” he admits.

Eiji declares, “You ding-dong. That was the whole point.”

“She is not tearing her hair out or drinking her sadness away. She’s dealing.” He stops himself just before he can add, So maybe you should, too. Quincy dealt with more of Eiji’s attacks than anyone else on ship, including Gregor. The captain let slip once that Eiji even asked for help through the Blue a couple times while Q was in the dorms for the evening.

“You are not even optimized for life,” Eiji says forlornly.

“What does that mean?” Gregor asks.

Talla says hurriedly, like slapping a band aid on the situation, “I’m sure the captain’s doing the best she can. I just meant what if Q comes back and the whole crew’s not here?”

“Shit if I know,” Gregor says. “She’s got Jack but then she also has that baby of hers.”

“Maybe she got a launch,” Eiji says. Gregor knows what Eiji can do with her tech, the networks she reaches out to across the waves, even though no one’s responded for days and days. There are little to no “maybes” in Eiji’s world. No one’s truly believed in
a real launch since the first year after the First Wave. Gregor waits to see the shadow fall, the acknowledgment of the lie. It doesn’t come.

“Yeah,” Gregor says carefully. “You can go next and tell the captain just that.”

“I gotta see her anyway,” Eiji says. “About the rogues. Research finally yielded some fruition. I think the captain should be in on it.”

“What’ve you got?” he asks, dreading, thinking about life support, about air filtration, about water supply, about hazmat suits and the engine, the stupid, stupid dying parts…

“Not much. Hey, are you listening? Listen. It’s pre-war. Production on that line stopped over a decade ago. Beetle model PXW-00814.” Gregor is no longer impressed by Eiji’s strange ability to recall everything but her past. “Last remaining stock parts were on the Eastern drop-off, the fourth hub. Nothing there’s logged as missing as of five years ago but then the databases stopped being updated when the Blue cut out. Hangars privately owned. Ships custom-suited. Same solar panels as our ships but bigger energy storage.”

“Doesn’t seem like not much,” Talla says.

Eiji shakes her head. “It tells us where the rover came from, not where it’s going. Not why where it’s going seems to be wherever our ships are.”

“It could make sense,” Gregor says. “A Beetle, I mean. The speed would match what Q and the other ships saw. They were marketed high-end, sold way pricey. Customization became a competition for a while there so amping up speed even more could be a possibility.”
Eiji plucks at loose threads on the sheets, tracing the striped pattern with a single finger. “What other kinds of customizations were there?”

“Anything. There was money to blow then.”

Eiji has always managed to look vaguely uncomfortable in all of her daily interactions, eyes darting, shoulders held in tight. Gregor knows this look now, though, seen it in her lightning-fast file-reading, the way she revamps her surveillance and security systems and watches all the pieces fall into place. She knows something. Seeing it makes his overfull stomach hurt, protesting. There is already too much to think about.

“I think they scanned the ship,” she says. “Is that possible for a customization? That kind of equipment would be heavy and bulky. At first I was operating on everyone’s premise that rogues would be looking to snatch food or manpower but the craft leveled alongside and high. They didn’t try to assess the cargo hold. Then I thought maybe they could be after the whole rover itself if their own are going bad but the speed they caught was more than our IATV ships are equipped to hit.”

“The equipment would only be a problem if they were using a set-up like yours. Beetle dashes can handle more complex tech, so anyone in that bridge could run a scan like that no problem.” Gregor watches Eiji carefully but she seems to notice and looks away, face still. It is worse than any reaction. “What would they be looking for?” he asks. He glances at Talla, the stress too much to handle – he goes over in his mind like a list he doesn’t want to forget: life support, air filtration, suits, engine; life support, air filtration, suits, engine -- and studies the ridges of her long nose, the color she still tints her lips with even in the end times.
“I don’t know,” Eiji says slowly. “But if they’re not looking for something it stands to reason that maybe they’re looking for someone.”

“No.” It is the first reaction Gregor has. “That is – no. Why would anyone?”

Covering his face with his hand, he makes a noise, frustrated and disgusted, and squeezes when Talla reaches out to touch his hand. “That’s messed up.” He says. Life support, air filtration, suits, engine…crew. Crew. “Is that something we can even protect against? How – No.” Gregor sinks in his seat and rubs at his forehead. When he looks at Eiji she is assessing him now, a little amused, a lot more tired. “What the fuck,” he murmurs, smiling at her because everything is going to shit. All he can think about over the maniac list that goes on through his head like a chant are bloodied box shrines and the desert stretching out so far, forever, wind blowing.

Lips twitching in the smallest approximation of an appreciative smile, Eiji’s eyes flit away and back again. The tight smile drops away too quickly. “What the fuck,” she agrees.

Gregor falls asleep with his head in Talla’s lap as she stays up to keep Eiji company. The chill of the air makes him pull the blanket in closer. Talla soothes the beanie off his head. Gregor’s sure he stinks of sweat and stress. The last thing he can remember is Eiji huddled at the table, eyes glowing bright blue, still digging and digging for information on a Beetle model, on launch rumors, on whatever it is that makes her keep searching. He thinks about asking her to find a way to track Quincy because what if she wants to come home again? Gregor knows what that is like, too. He falls asleep before the words can leave.
He wakes to still air gone hot with too many exhaled breaths, still thinking *life support, air filtration, suits, engine, crew, life support*.... Air filtration. Gregor sits up abruptly on the bed, poised on the edge of a thought he doesn’t understand at first. His skin slips, sweaty, against Talla’s limbs flung every which way. “E,” he says into the darkness, disconcerted by the lack of Blue light. The tech must not have slept for more days than Gregor had previously thought.

It takes a few seconds but Eiji’s always been a light sleeper. “What?” she asks.

“You okay?” he asks first because it’s habit. He’s still too hazy from sleep to make sense of anything.

“I wish everyone would quit asking that,” Eiji says, sounding just as groggy. She clears her throat and the sound is too loud. Talla turns suddenly in her sleep, curling inward. Her forehead is damp with sweat when she presses it to Gregor’s wrist, murmuring.

The realization hits Gregor wordlessly and, despite the overwhelming heat, he feels that chill of fear, just like earlier in Suo’s apartment, a falling dread. He shakes Talla awake and starts to move. “The air system,” he says. “Baby, it’s time to wake up. Something’s wrong.” He fumbles his thoughts into the Blue, heart accelerating. The server runs blank and Gregor’s stomach curdles. The local system must have gone down with the power. Something is terribly wrong. “Shit. E, get up. Can we connect to the rest of the crew?” He sees Talla try to turn on a light, working her way into action without question, a holdover from her days as a protester. She moves in the dark, eyes going blue to see.
Eiji’s eyes go Blue and Gregor can just dimly make out the brief clapping of his wife’s hand on Eiji’s. It only makes the roaring pulse in his head win out over his thoughts, just another confirmation that something is wrong, that they are not okay.

“I can still use implant idents to hack their feeds, so, yes,” Eiji says. She stands awkwardly in the middle of the room, hands clutching each arm tightly like she’s trying to stay small.

“What do we need, babe?” Talla asks, shoving things into a bag like a trooper. The knick-knacks fall one by one.

“Food and clothes,” Gregor says, trying to stay calm. “Survival gear. Keep it light on the souvenirs.” He starts grabbing for Talla’s scarves and touches of home on the shelves over the bed anyway because it’s all he can do for her. Gregor shoves his feet into his boots. “Get the Hongs, E. They need to find the captain.” Suo doesn’t have a neuroimplant for the Blue, stubborn as she always was about system changes.

Gregor stops and stares hard through the interface only to see Eiji start to tremble. He touches the back of Talla’s neck in passing then stoops and lightly touches Eiji’s upper arms, not daring to grip. “The air filtration is out, E” he says slowly. “Someone is shutting down the factory. We gotta get the crew. We gotta go.”
04. Cassie

Sharing a room with Charlie was never part of any of Cassie’s escape plans. She tells herself the same two things every time her sister grates on her last nerve, talking and asking questions and trying to cook awful experimental meals and *hovering*: 1) Unexpected consequences are a necessary hazard in running away and 2) It’s not like Cassie’s spent her life dreaming of becoming a pilot in some rundown factory, post-world’s end either, even if it isn’t so bad. So she puts up with Charlie, day in and day out – dodging, yelling, threatening, avoiding -- and at night she dreams of fleeing, visions of maps studied and legs aching, feet slapping pavement, and jolting, disembodied visions of winding streets, houses and houses and never people.

Cassie is dreaming of the sun beating down and running through abandoned city streets when she hears a voice calling to her. The voice gets louder and more familiar. Cassie stops in the middle of the street, panting and sweaty. Squinting, she looks up at the sky. The voice says, “—ongs. Wake up. Get up or I’m patching E through to wreak havoc with your Blue.”

Cassie wakes in the night to a confusing flash of aquamarine light and overlapping voices that crowd close as thoughts, foreign, disorienting. “Get out to the hangar,” someone says. It takes a few more seconds for Cassie to understand that it is Gregor. “Can you hear me? Wake up and get out to the hangar. We don’t have time to come get you.”

“Quit it,” Cassie says loudly, voice rough with sleep. No one’s supposed to hack the neural implants ever and, even if *someone* did it is still way too early for work. (Eiji has never abused her abilities for midnight pranks but Cassie knows firsthand how boring
the rover at night can get. Not to mention she knows E and this kind of stunt is not beneath that tiny, rude girl.)

“Get up, get up, get up,” Gregor says. Something clatters in the background. Admittedly it is a bit of a stretch that E would wrangle Gregor Cho into this kind of immature business. Then again, he is the grown man who nearly knocks down the door every morning to get the Hongs to work like they are small horse children in need of wrangling. Irritated, Cassie fidgets in her blankets, itchy everywhere, reaching blindly to throw it off while still keeping her head firmly beneath the sweltering heat of her pillow. It registers in a vacuum suction of thought: The room is sweltering. She opens her eyes and the Blue spreads out in full. None of her feeds open. Only blank boxes and the audio activation controls off to the side stare back. That’s not right. It can’t be right.

“What the fuck is going on?” Cassie asks into the darkness, already throwing her legs over the edge of the bed, heart pounding. She throws back the sheet curtain around her bed, ready to raise hell.

“Get up and get the captain.”

“What?”

Beyond the interface she can see Charlie sitting up in her bed, curls everywhere and a shiny streak of drool down her chin. “What’s wrong?” Charlie asks, like nothing through the Blue roused her, only Cassie’s voice. It pisses Cassie off. “What’s wrong?” Her eyes glow bright blue and she looks around like she’s trying to shake off the feed.

Gregor’s voice comes through again. “Oh thank god. Get up, doc.”

“Yeah, we got that,” Cassie snipes, gripping the sheets.

“We need you both to go get the captain. Do you understand me?”
“No. What time is it—”

“We’re heading out to the hangar to ready the ship. Listen to me. We think admin shut off the air and power. If this were a malfunction the generators would kick in. There is no generator malfunction, not for the air. Okay? So if this is total shutdown we gotta get out of here. We gotta go.”

“What?” Cassie asks, breathless and small, one more time just to feign a belligerence she no longer feels. The sweat begins to trace trails down her face. She wipes them away roughly. She doesn’t move.

Across from her, Charlie throws back her sheets and goes to shrug on her jacket and shoes at the same time. Her voice is far away, like something underwater, when she links into audio and says, “Why the hangar? The air will be cut there too.” Cassie may not particularly for the company of her big sister but she knows damn well Charlie is not that stupid. It makes her spiral a little more, knowing Charlie is scared, too. Cassie slowly lies back down on the bed. When she pulls her pillow back across her face she can feel the cool remnants of absorbed sweat.

“It’s not the filtration we need, doc,” Eiji says patiently, quietly through the Blue. “We’re taking the ship. The factory is not going to hold.” Cassie shuts her eyes as though to sleep.

(The dorms were never supposed to be home. The dorms were never supposed to be home. The dorms were never supposed to be home. The dorms were never supposed to be…)
Charlie’s voice grows louder and softer as she moves through the apartment, packing by the sounds of it. “Cassie. Cass, wake up. Please, we have to go now. Come on, let’s go.”

The imperative only makes Cassie’s muscles tighten, an automatic reaction. The room is uncomfortably hot. Her feet tangle in the thin blanket but throwing off the fabric offers no reprieve. As though startled from a bad dream, her pulse throbs through her head, adrenaline burns and pulls. “Cassie,” Charlie says, one hand alighting on her sister’s shoulder. “It’s okay. It’ll be okay but we have to go—” Cassie flinches away so forcefully her shoulder hits the wall next to her cot. She scrambles to sit up, her sister obscured by the Blue and the shadows in the dark.

“Don’t,” she says.

“Cass…”

The air presses in close and hot. Cassie is not sure she is awake, if she is still asleep and dreaming darkly of running, always running. She has been looking for escapes and exits since she was very young because everywhere has felt like a cage and a tomb. (The dorms were not supposed to be home.)

“Just go,” she tells Charlie, wrapped in a blanket that only makes her skin flare and flame in the close heat. It is like suffocating. It is like staying.

*It could be different this time,* she thinks, unconvinced. *I could be the one that stays.* Her legs ache in phantom burns and pulls, tired from dream-running night after night. (The dorms are not home. They’re not.) It is easier than admitting fear.
Cassie is three, Charlie is five, and they have spent most of their young lives high in the sky, flying first-class to attend to their fathers’ global, multibillion-dollar industry. Oren Hong and William Conway own Hong Meds, Inc., the leading medical supplier worldwide, but to their young daughters they are just Baba and Dad. Cassie is used to her sister’s soothing placations during their dads’ absences, her big-girl lectures on their fathers’ important work, and how Cassie is a big girl now, too. Cassie doesn’t want those words; she wants their dads. “Don’t cry, don’t cry,” Charlie says over and over again. She sits on the floor, her chin cushioned on the edge of Cassie’s mattress. She knows better than to come close, to lay hands on her sister without permission. Cassie cries herself practically sick and their nanny holds Cassie to her chest as she watches the evening news. Cassie doesn’t have to look to see their nanny smiling when Charlie asks, from across the living room, “Can I sit, too?” Everyone smiles at Charlie. They look at Cassie differently.

There is always business for Baba to attend to and everyone knows he is grooming Charlie as his heiress. Though she is still very much a child, the world already knows her face and her intellect. They come up with as many similes for precocious as they can in the magazine and news articles. Cassie scowls at the camera and fusses in the public. Baba is handsome and distant. He sees the way Cassie fidgets and cries at the sight of the ship and he looks to Charlie to stop it. Baba’s business always means flying and Cassie loves Baba but she hates the transport ships.

Cassie is three and she thinks of asking to be left behind. Three years old and she understands, already, that she is the spare, unnecessary. Baba makes her sit alone in the back of the plane with the nanny until she can get herself under control. The take-off is
what rattles Cassie the most, the swollen feeling in her ears, the way her balance goes
diagonal, the roar of the engines and the sight of the wingtips just out the window. When
they’re in the clouds she can tuck her head into her seat tray and force sleep, listening to
her nanny hum and try to coax Cassie’s face out. Without fail, when she wakes Charlie is
sitting across the aisle, asleep or reading and the nanny says, “Look what your sister
brought for you.” She makes the plush unicorn dance, swinging its red tail. Its name is
Lala and Lala is for home. The smaller blue T-Rex, Edgar, is for travel, for plane rides,
and he is sitting in Cassie’s backpack beneath her seat. Cassie digs for Edgar to hold. She
will not take Lala from Roberta. She looks her nanny’s frown with a stone face. Charlie
sleeps on. It is Cassie’s earliest memory, the crystal clear realization that she should be
one place and her sister, her family everywhere else.

It is not a dream. The anger wins out only in reality. In her dreams, Cassie is
always alone. Through the Blue Gregor snaps, “Cassie, you are in or you are out but if
you don’t haul ass you don’t get to fly the rover, ever. Now one of you has got to get the
captain, quit wasting time.” Cassie sits up grudgingly. She doesn’t like to think of Quincy
because that is a war in her mind. Quincy left, she ran, the way Cassie always did, her
entire life. People are allowed to do that. They should. But Cassie was counting on Q as
her mentor, her teacher on ship. Ever since Cassie has stopped running, Charlie in tow
and weighing her down, she has only ever wanted to fly.

Gregor says, “Captain won’t be in the Blue and it’s her exit plan we’re working
off of. Doc, you gotta do it. Grab her, meet us at the hangar. Cass, we need you piloting
so hurry up.”
Flying is better than staying. Cassie opens her eyes and sees her sister freeze mid-packing and turn to look at her, eyes lit by the Blue and open wide, like she doesn’t believe Cassie is ready to pilot, like she wants to protect her from doing anything. She is kneeling in front of the old cabinet stuffed with the things from home that Cassie had left behind and Charlie had brought with her before the dorms and rovers, before the crew and hangar. A ratty plush dinosaur is clutched in one hand, so small now. Cassie stares, disbelieving. She doesn’t want to see. She gets out of bed, half-dressed, sour with sweat, and says, “Don’t be a fucking idiot. Leave it all except the food. Let’s go.” Charlie finishes stuffing in the dinosaur atop tins of Pro-V. Their run bags are still packed and sitting near the door, ready for a day of work that hasn’t come in weeks. It’s all Cassie stops to take.

The hallways are confusion and choked air. Neighbors have started to open their doorways, murmuring to one another, pushing back matted locks damp with perspiration. It’s not the first time the air system has gone out but it is the first time without warning. All prior shutdowns have been for cleaning or systems checkup. The Pro-V output may be running out but the equipment in the factory and dorms have never been subpar. Gregor’s right: If this was a freak accident and not a systems checkup, the generators would have kicked in by now and everyone would be able to get back to sleep. She wonders if admin really thought they could steal away at the butt-crack of dawn without anyone noticing the factory had shut down. Then she realizes just how much they need Johanna. Once enough people realize what’s going on, it’ll be a mad rush for the ships. Ships with air filtration systems.
Cassie holds her arm out before Charlie can bustle past her. They stand out enough with their packed bags. A beeline to the exit will only make things worse. “Wait.” She’s not sure why it rankles her when Charlie listens without question, hovering, always hovering. Over her shoulder, she snaps, “What is your problem?” She is not bothered by Charlie’s hurt, confused face. “You’re dressed, genius.”

Having not bothered to dress, Cassie looks the least suspicious in her sports bra and pajama pants, sleep-rumpled from head to toe, suitably disgruntled but that is also thankfully her default expression. Charlie begins to strip out of her jacket. In the doorway to her left, their neighbor, an older man named Luis, opens his door. He wipes the perspiration from his brow with a dirty handkerchief, then catches sight of Cassie and shakes his head. “’S like the devil’s ass crack in here. How long’s it been like this?”

“Dunno,” Cassie says. “Just woke up.” She looks around, surveying the scene. She remembers being ten and telling the man on guard duty at the door of their home that she needed to leave the property, needed to see her daddies. The sneak-out, the second big step in running away after sufficient, efficient packing, was best when there were witnesses, a trail of adults left behind to explain their own idiocy. That way it would never be Cassie’s fault. There were always witnesses with holes in their tales. Though, this time, there will probably not be anyone at the top to question their subordinates. This time it is all up to Cassie to make sure no one knows what is going on so they can get away before anyone else decides to head to the hangar, starting off a stampede.

“Can’t be a malfunction,” Luis says, face scrunched. He’s a mechanic over on the rover Solomon. He nods his chin at Cassie’s bright blue eyes. “No updates in the Blue?”
Cassie mouth dries, at a loss for words. It has always been easy when all she had to worry about was getting away for her own sake. The pressure sits on her like a phantom. She looks at Luis and says, “Uhm.” Her pack is heavy against her shoulder blades. There are too many witnesses. There is no way out.

“Hey, Luis,” Charlie says, nudging her way to Cassie’s side, their bodies too close in the small doorway. She smiles at Luis prettily. “I’m sure it’ll come back on. Someone must be working on it, right?”

“Well—” Luis has been living in the dorms longer than even the captain and Quincy.

Charlie barrels on. “We’re going to go check on Suo, though. She wasn’t feeling so well earlier and the heat’s only going to make it worse. Wasn’t going to get sleep in this racket anyway.”

Luis chuckles. “You’re too good for that woman, doc.” Cassie almost grins. She knows Suo has a weird reputation in the hangar as both the life of the party and a scourge among men for everything about the past her mere presence dredges up. The urge to smile goes cold when Luis says, smiling big only at Charlie, “We sure could use someone like you on our crew if you’re interested. Lots of scrapes and bruises for you to tend to.”

“What are you doing?” Gregor asks. “Report in. We’re at the ship. Moving it out to the hangar without you, Cass.”

“Tempting,” Charlie laughs. “But my sister and I are a package deal and Suo’s got her on pilot till Q comes back.” Cassie scowls. She can’t move with grip Charlie suddenly has on the back of her sports bra, right where the straps crisscross. It’s the problem about running away with a partner: not being the only one calling the shots.
“Miss Nasib still searching for her family?” Luis asks. He leans against the doorway like he’s settling in for a nice, long conversation.

Cassie considers pulling away hard enough for the material to rip from Charlie’s hands. She’s not sure how much she would regret half-streaking through the dorms. There are already people stripped pretty much to their skivvies in the heat. No one’s stupid enough to brave the outside world just for some cooler air, not with the threat of the black mold. Cassie half-convinces herself to break away until she realizes she’d just end up half-naked with the rest of the crew aboard Johanna. It is not worth that risk.

“Where’d you hear that?” Charlie asks and she mirrors Luis’s movement, leaning on the doorjamb, getting comfortable. Luis looks at Charlie, not Cassie. Charlie’s grip does not slacken.

“What the fuck are you two doing? Doc, quit wasting time. Get out of there. Get Suo.”

Cassie can’t even answer without anyone overhearing, catching the urgency in her voice. She sees eyes start to go blue in the hallway, bright and glaring. They’re going to see the server is down. They’re going to run soon. Every one of them.

Cassie panics, standing still.

Cassie is twelve, Charlie is fourteen, and the world is at war. They live in an underground bunker that seems to go on for miles. Confined to a single sector with over a hundred other people, close family members of Hong Meds’ top scientists, the Hong girls see their fathers only when they enter the facilities. Weeks later and neither has the courage to ask the other if they think their dads are even still alive, somewhere topside,
trying to get the soldiers through the fight with makeshift infirmaries, trying to get leaders and advisers through decisions with all the financial backing they can provide now that the economy’s gone far worse than south.

It is not what Cassie is thinking about that night. She is thinking about the other children in the bunker calling her a test tube baby behind her back and then to her face. They say it like the whole world scorns the Hong girls, rich little women who don’t deserve their inheritance or the world’s attention. Cassie thinks about the ways she can show them just how smart she really is, how she can make them cry the way she refuses to in the night. Cassie thinks about finding a way out of the bunker and running the streets until the fire in her lungs can burn her from the inside out. Cassie thinks about invisibility and disappearing and never being a Hong again.

The bunker has a single entrance and exit, two dozen floodlights, lockdown orders, and eight guards on rotation all night. Cassie is explaining to a guard that she had a nightmare and, no, she doesn’t want Charlie, she wants her dads. The Bunker Mother, a strict woman named Polly, approaches. She is in charge of the children in this sector whenever their parents are called to work or meet with the others for weekly check-ins. Polly likes reading the same dog-eared books cover-to-cover and frowning at Cassie disapprovingly. She talks to the guard, not Cassie, and holds out her hand like a leash. These are desperate times and Cassie is not Charlie, is a caged animal, is a little girl full of rage. She bites Polly’s hand.

It isn’t enough to have her fathers summoned or vice versa, despite having drawn blood and left crater imprints of her incisors on the ridges of Polly’s flat knuckles. Bitterly, Cassie regrets the minimal extent of damage inflicted. Charlie is woken up, a
stand-in mother and authority at fourteen. Cassie is held out by Polly by the scruff of her pajamas like a pup who’s soiled the carpet. The bleariness in Charlie’s eyes clears immediately into alertness. “She’s very sorry,” she says, not bothering to ask for context. “She is. Oh gosh, are you--? You’re bleeding. Did she--?” Charlie gets up, blankets tumbling every which way, planting Cassie on the bed by the shoulders, using her own body like a shield. “I’ll talk to her. You should get that checked – but – uh. She’s had all her shots. So.” Charlie stops and rubs her forehead self-consciously, composing herself. Her Hong voice comes on in full gear, in control and leaving no room for questions when she says, “I’ll talk to her.”

“She was trying to get permission to see your fathers,” Polly says. Cassie gnashes her teeth at the pity in her voice. She can still taste blood.

“Thank you,” Charlie says. “She’s sorry.” In the time it takes for Charlie to turn, Cassie realizes who she really needs to injure to get her fathers’ attention. Clad in a t-shirt and sleep shorts, there are myriad vulnerable points exposed on her sister’s body. They gleam like beacons in the half-dark. But when Charlie stifles a laugh and a smile instead of launching into a lecture, Cassie thinks sullenly that maybe a black eye will be enough. She is tired. She has been angry so long that she cannot let go, not completely. She looks away at the cots in neat rows, full of sleeping bodies, knowing there are more floors above and below, filled with people being kept safe, kept away. *Such a luxurious prison,* she thinks, not for the first time.

Charlie sits on Cassie’s empty cot and slips her legs under the blanket. She’s known Cassie long enough to give her sister space and plenty of it. “Why’d you want to see dads?”
“Why don’t you?”

It is like watching a bullet ricochet, Charlie’s body recoiling even though she tries to contain it, make it roll off her like all the rest of Cassie’s acid barbs. It has never been fair how perfect Charlie seems every time she doesn’t cry. Polly’s blood sits like thick silver in the back of Cassie’s throat.

“Because they are doing their jobs and we are one less thing for them to worry about knowing we’re safe in here. This isn’t about you, Cassie. It’s not like they don’t want to see us.”

“Shouldn’t they worry about us, though?” You, she amends in her mind. They’d worry about you because how could the company continue without you how would the world keep spinning how would I ever replace you you you.

Charlie’s hair fans out like a swarm on Cassie’s pillow. “What would you even do if you saw them, Cassie? Won’t it be better to see them when they’re not so busy with…everything?”

“No,” Cassie says, voice watery. It is true, it is not true. The ache of it speeds through her, toes to brain. Sometimes she forgets what Baba’s voice sounds like. But Baba is not there and neither is Dad. Only Charlie and Charlie can hurt people too. Cassie knows the person her sister hurts the most is always Cassie. “You don’t understand,” she says, suddenly, violently, the truth foreign on her tongue and the wrongness of it thrills through her. It falls through her teeth like saltwater. Her teeth catch her lips, splitting skin. She turns on her side, backpack still strapped on and weighing her down into the thin canvas. Cassie knows Charlie won’t cry. It only makes her sob harder, loudly, until Polly is forced to come back, hand bandaged, to quiet her down before she wakes the
whole room. Cassie doesn’t care. She wants her fathers to know exactly who they are hurting, to know just what they are doing to the daughter they care about on paper only.

For the first time in their lives, Charlie doesn’t come to soothe her. Cassie doesn’t know what the fuck she is so proud of when it hurts like hell. The next day she watches her sister talk to Polly. Their words do not carry but the conversation lasts a good long while. Charlie’s expression shifts and she moves her hands in that way she does when someone asked her about her hobbies, like she is trying to grab hold of her interests to shove in the other person’s face. Cassie watches Charlie learn what she suspects are all of Polly’s secrets and she thinks of running footsteps on pavement and locks turning, switches flicking, skin breaking beneath teeth, instead of wondering why Charlie never tries to learn any of Cassie’s secrets either.

Charlie laughs at something Luis says and her mouth shapes Quincy’s name over and over, like it’s all okay, like Quincy didn’t just leave the crew in the dust, didn’t even say goodbye, didn’t look back. She supposes Charlie is used to being the one watching others run. Cassie would rather be the one running. She struggles with the thick air in the hallway, ignoring Charlie’s chatter, and Gregor’s voice in the Blue, loud, demanding. She tries to breathe too deep and it sticks. More neighbors are gathering now, talking to Charlie, the nice Hong, the good doctor. She’s the girl who drops by unannounced with gifts in hand and polite questions about well-being. They are looking to her to calm them down. They don’t expect answers when they could just have Charlie’s easy smile, Charlie who knows everyone in the damn dorm. Cassie does not have names for faces. With
Charlie’s grip on the back of her bra, it even looks like she is part of the crowd and the conversation. Cassie wants to yell just to see everyone take a step back.

“What’s your status?” Gregor asks, too loud in the Blue. “Where are you?”

“We’re going to check on our captain now,” Cassie practically shouts, tearing her body away with a twist. “Very sick. She’s very sick.” She feels the stares on her, the assessments of how different the Hongs sisters are, and how Cassie is just so unpleasant in comparison. Well. Fuck that. It’s fine as long as no one’s paying attention to the pack on her back or the jump of her pulse at her throat and the way her hands shake, just slightly. Her eyes dart to the stairwell and the windows that overlook the hangar. Everything outside still sits dark and silent. The captain lives two floors up. Cassie doesn’t wait for Charlie to follow.

In the stairwell, irritated with the heat and the clamor of conversation on every floor, she asks Gregor, “Is there a reason you couldn’t have headed for Suo, jackass? Everyone’s awake. We might as well just fly the ship through the building.”

“We had E, barbarian,” Gregor says and, though it shouldn’t be excuse enough, it kind of is. “Where are you? Anyone following. We got the ship out and locked down but I sure as hell don’t trust E to fly it.”

“I could fly it,” Eiji says but the way she says anything it could just as well be a lie.

“Don’t you dare. I’ll be there,” Cassie says. She tells herself that she’s the one who’s learned the right moments to take flight. She’s the one who knows heartache and the pull in her legs that mean it is time to run and run fast. Maybe she could even leave Charlie behind for good, once and for all.
From behind the stairwell door clatters and Charlie takes the stairs two steps at a time, her footfalls echoing and amplified. She doesn’t call out because she knows better. Cassie walks faster, panting harder. The stairwell would normally be filled with flickering lights or no lights at all so it’s habit to navigate through the Blue interface, made somewhat easier by the feeds devoid of text or images. Their steps float in fetid puddles and downed wires.

“Where do you think we’re going?” Charlie asks. She is no idiot, always top of the class. She is Oren Hong’s daughter by blood. She is not dumb, she is scared. “What about everyone else? Luis and Mrs. O’Connell’s family and--

_Away_. We’re going away, Cassie thinks but she says, “No one’s holding a gun to your head.”

Suo appears out of the dark, a hulking figure limned in bright blue through the interface of Cassie’s neural implant. Her hands are pressed to each stairwell wall and it’s clear she’s walking blind through the dark. “Captain,” Cassie calls, relieved.

Suo laughs loud, doesn’t flinch. “Hong Two! Fancy meeting you here,” she says.

“We were just coming to get you,” Charlie says.

“We got her,” Cassie says to Gregor who makes a ridiculous noise and keeps shouting bossy directions that aren’t any help at all. Cassie shuts down audio.

One of Suo’s hands wanders from the railings. “Where are you? Help the needy. Bad enough getting this far.”

“Oh my God,” Cassie says when the captain grabs hold, their hands slipping together. “Gross.”

“Excuse you, I don’t exactly want to be holding your hand either, you punk –”
“It’s all sweaty—”

“Doc, where the fuck are you? Give me your goddamn hand.”

Cassie drops Suo’s wet hand like a dead rat and sneers. She takes the lead as Suo reaches for Charlie and yells, “This is why you’re Hong Two!”

It is a little easier to breathe with someone other than Charlie for company but barely. Booking it down the stairs, however, is just the right amount of adrenaline and pure escape. They break from the dorm and into the night, the air rushing forward like a blast chill. It quenches so suddenly that Cassie gasps with it, letting it flare through her lungs like lift-off, like flying. This is what escape feels like, that dangerous and wonderful first step of freedom. She remembers this well. She almost can’t begrudge Quincy.

Together the three women take the short stretch of pockmarked road between the two buildings that rise like twin moons, huge and shadowed against the night sky. The length and enormity of each cut off the horizon. The air is crisp and clean but it is still dangerous. There is no time for precautions. The moonlight splashes them in plain view and so they run.

“Nobody said anything about leaving before,” Charlie says. “Captain, it’s too soon.”

Suo says, “Sorry, doc. Thought the factory would hold longer. Something must have happened.”

“Like what?”

“Ask E when we see her. We’ll all talk later. One big Kumbaya My Lord.”

Cassie looks straight at the captain. “What?”
“Shut up. For now, once people realize what’s going on they are going to start tearing things and each other to pieces so just haul ass. Come on.”

Circling round the hangar Cassie breathes harder at the sight of Johanna on the airfield, clear for take-off. Her lungs burn and it is good, a familiar feeling. They are running, all of them together, and that is something she can almost understand. She knows what it is like to be in a strange city, four days from her last meal, spinning with dehydration and threats from all sides, trapped in a crowd of people bustling for rations on the streets. Together but not together. Different from alone. “So I have a question for you,” she pants out. “How long can Johanna hold out?” She sprints harder.

Charlie pants, says, “Wait, what about everyone else?”

Suo turns to look back over her shoulder at the dormitories only once. Later Cassie will wonder if one of the ladies Suo hooked up with actually meant something to the captain. She will wonder if that last look back held regret because she knows what that is like even if she will never admit it. “Let’s save the questions, ladies,” the captain says lightly, between breaths. “Some of us are not young and spritely.”

“Good thing you’re sober, too,” Cassie says, smirking.

“That was your alcohol and it was poison.”

“A small attempt at mutiny.” Never mind that it ended in tears and sickness for all involved, including and especially Cassie.

“Well,” Suo pants. “Save it for when we’re actually on the ship, otherwise what’s the point?”

They approach the hull in a full sprint, breathing open-mouthed, great heaving gasps that sound too loud in the empty stretch of sand and stars. It better be worth it,
Cassie thinks, all this deep breathing outside of safe zones. Gregor grabs at everyone’s bags, making disappointing remarks at the sheer amount of keepsakes, and starts to close the cargo hold door. His wife, the statuesque Talla, greets everyone with a stoic nod and a tight smile. “Where’s E?” Suo asks. She doesn’t pause, already heading for the stairs that will take her up and through the commons. “Everyone here?”

“We’re good,” Gregor says. “But captain?”

“What?”

Cassie’s already thinking through the flight procedures Quincy has spent weeks drilling into her, all their lessons accelerating into dirty name-calling before the end of each run. The last thing she hears before she hits the top of the staircase is Gregor asking the captain simply, “Quincy?”

There is no point to sticking around to hear the answer. Cassie bolts ahead towards the bridge. It’s time for a great escape. “E?” she asks through the Blue. This she can do. This is running in style. Her knees slam against the underside of the dash as she takes the pilot’s seat. The screens are all up and that, at least, is a small miracle. “How are we looking?”

“Factory server’s down. We only have comms and nothing else, tech wise.”

“Are you going to die?”

“I’ll rig something. We got some people following our lead, though so I advise shaking them before our group gets too big. We’ve only got a couple shipments in our hold and we need food to last.”

“Every man, woman, child for his or her self?”

“Looks like. No direct orders from anyone yet.”
Cassie sighs and starts take-off sequence, not even pausing when she hears Suo start to cross the bridge like a war queen, huge, stomping steps. “Out,” the captain says. Her tone’s changed and Cassie knows Gregor’s question got under the captain’s skin.

“I got this,” she says, flexing her fingers on the yoke. She wonders if Gregor’s got the engine under control after all the tinkering he did during the break. She feels Suo’s stare. Suo is not Quincy. Bodily removal is not necessary. “Are you serious?” Cassie moves slowly, extracting herself, anger flaring. Her knees hit the bottom of the control panel a second time and she can practically hear the bruises singing through the pain. It grounds her somewhat. She goes to sit uselessly in the co-pilot’s seat and watches the captain guide her baby into the sky. Her stomach drops at the ascent. Cassie does not watch the dorms recede through the windshield. She will not take a last look. She will not pity those left behind because she is not Charlie. She focuses on the impassive stars spread out like a net, holding back Original Earth from the Terra colonies somewhere far beyond.

“We flying blind?” she asks the captain. She can’t imagine there’s anywhere to go anymore in the world. The dorms were not supposed to be home but they may have been pretty damn close. Cassie detests the thought. She thinks maybe she is scared when she shivers but it is only when she moves to strap herself in does she realize she is cold, her bare flesh broken out in goose pimples.

Suo only looks over, a quick flick of her eyes, and looks back at the windshield, grinning. Cassie wasn’t expecting an answer anyway. “Where is your shirt?” Suo asks.
Cassie is still twelve, but Charlie is not here. The world is quiet outside the bunker. Cassie spends the first day of her freedom sprinting in huge zig-zags across the city, trying to cover as much ground as possible without leaving any traces behind. The sun bears down on the back of her neck and the flush of her scalp like a poison. She skirts buildings and dashes across empty streets. Twice she stops to dry heave, and then once more to breathe through the stitches in her side that cramp and crush like broken ribs. The streets are blurs before her vision; she wouldn’t have seen a war even if she had bothered to look.

By the time she has to stop for good she is in an alleyway, certain she will never catch her breath again. Piles of trash let up toxic steam around her. The black plastic is broken open like soft fruit, unleashing pulped liquid onto the pavement. Cassie breathes it deep anyway, chest on fire, head throbbing. Sweat sits on her like a second layer of skin. Glancing around to get her bearings she keeps going, leaving behind wet footprints that dry quickly and fade, leaving only the odor of a long journey behind.

Another mile or two later and limping now that she’s finally slowed enough to feel her body’s protests, Cassie begins to see people at last. There are only a few shifty bodies at first, but then pairs, and then whole groups. Following the trickle she winds up in a parking lot, breathless, the sweat running wet down her spine. No one looks askance at her. Invisible and exuberant, Cassie readjusts her backpack and begins pushing her way forward.

Up ahead, men and women sit and stand in an open truck bed, handing out cardboard boxes that teeter, making its contents clink. It is only when one tips over and spills tins everywhere that Cassie realizes what each contains: Pro-V. The brand is new
and making bank on the demand to keep the cooped-up populace fed and healthy while wars and riots keep the wheels from turning. Cassie knows it’s only a matter of time before the bunker starts relying on the protein vitamin supplements everyone’s been hearing so much about, but that could be years down the road thanks to her fathers’ company and their own emergency stock of lab crops and other nonperishables. Families in the bunkers still feast nightly on MREs, a holdover stock from some of the smaller overseas missions to Sino-Korea that had been planned and aborted seven years ago. Neither Hong girl had seen Baba for over nine months that time. Cassie remembers it well.

Wading out of the crowd to stand in the shade of a nearby store, Cassie pulls at her shirt to fan herself and figure out her bearings. The windows of the market are broken in, an ugly mouth of broken glass left behind. “It’s them that turned the power off,” a woman says as she and her friends stop to trade tins back and forth. She chucks an orange can back into her box after a cursory glance at the label.

“What do you mean?” asks another woman, blonde, disheveled.

“They don’t want us knowing what’s going on.” The woman keeps rummaging, face growing sourer when all she unearths is orange tin after orange tin. “All the companies at the top that fell, what do you think they were doing with all that money anyway?”

A man scoffs. “Does it matter now? We were groveling for scraps then. Now all we got is this pureed horseshit.”

“Lab crops cost money,” the blonde says. “Better spent on ships away, I say.”
“And where’s the proof that special planet exists?” asks the man. Everyone mumbles but nobody answers. “Beef for a chicken,” he offers the woman with the sour face. He extends a purple tin and reaches for an orange can.

“Bless you,” the woman says, grasping the proffered variety like a lifesaver.

Cassie’s stomach aches but she feels lightheaded enough to know that free food is not going to come by this easily all the time. She hitches her backpack and gets in line. She needs to do this right. There had been no time to figure out provisions in her flight from the bunker because it meant too much weight and she’d had no destination. She takes the cardboard box with a nod of thanks. It is surprisingly light and mostly green tins marked “Mixed Vegetables.” She steals a bike on the side of the road a couple blocks over, ties down the box of Pro-V to the rack above the back wheel and thinks *I can do this. I’m doing this.* The wind feels like triumph against the rank mess of her forehead.

By nightfall there is still no sign of pursuit. Cassie shivers beneath the only jacket she thought to pack, the Pro-V box between her ankles. She is sitting on the porch of some kind of school, teeth chattering every time she sucks in a breath. Worrying about the cold or heat had been the last thing on her mind in the Hongs’ climate-controlled apartment or even the stupid bunker with its air filtration system and gashes of light erected on tall poles, warmth exuding from every bulb and off all the bodies packed tight. The extra sweater or t-shirt is relegated to another could’ve-would’ve-should’ve list. It’s too late now. All Cassie has in her arsenal is the Pro-V and her memories.

It takes longer than she expects for her fathers’ crews to find her. She makes them chase her down on foot, taunting them despite her fear, that feeling of inevitability, until one dares to tackle her, body on body. It is the only way she can allow herself to be taken
back, bruises and all. At the bunker Charlie doesn’t reach for a hand or a hug when Cassie is shuffled back into the main room. It is two Hong girls under so many unabashed stares once again. Cassie stares back with her torn-up face and unrepentant eyes. Baba and Dad hadn’t turned up anywhere. Cassie’s bag is still full of Pro-V that she eats loudly, smacking her lips, while the others dine on MREs and tinned lab crops.

Later that night Charlie will finally work up the courage and the even tone to say, “I worried.” She says it like she is afraid of a snipe or insult, like she doesn’t want an answer, like maybe she means it. The air in the bunker is blessedly cool, a perfect autumn day chill. The lamps overhead are like sunlight behind clouds.

Cassie doesn’t stay long. She never remembers to bring a jacket or a sweater and spends whole nights shivering, miserable. It feels the way running away should.

The crew touches down after almost a full day of flight and Gregor’s increasingly vehement diatribes on the workings of Johanna’s engines at high speeds and long durations. Delivery rovers were never meant for this kind of sustained travel. They were meant for port-hopping and frequent stops. This is the reason Shenzhou went down, all the extra runs they pulled. These are not expensive ships. They were meant to be expendable. Suo lands just to shut him up. Cassie is thankful enough not to ask if she’s ever going to be allowed to pilot the rover. With Gregor still bitching about the mechanics of Inner Atmosphere Transportation Vehicle types and Suo yelling at Eiji about the lack of resources now that they’ve strayed too far from the factory’s Blue server, Cassie heads for her room in the crew quarters.
It’s not fair that she is not being allowed to fly and she’d like to think everyone on crew knows it. Without the bridge, Cassie has no purpose being on ship. And if she has no purpose, then she is better off back on the run without the threat of home or responsibility or Big Sister always watching with a smile on her face.

Rounding the corner to the crew quarters, trying to devise a plan to avoid Charlie’s inevitable pep talk about how everything is going to be fine as long as they’re together, Cassie runs into Talla. “Uhm,” she says as the imposing figure kneeling and blocking Cassie’s way in the hallway overrun with everyone’s bags.

“Hello,” Talla says. “I’ll be just a second. I’m missing a bag.” She is wearing a long dress, dark green, her shoulders exposed. The two women are fairly well acquainted by sight but Cassie’s never had much to say to Gregor’s wife besides salutations and grudging murmurs of thanks for a meal well-prepared during the rare occasions Charlie managed to drag Cassie over to the Chos’ apartment. “You haven’t happened to have seen my husband?”

Cassie is not Quincy but she rolls her eyes all the same. “Lady, your husband’s head is going to be on a spike if he doesn’t shut up about Johanna’s precious undercarriage. And your bag is probably still down in cargo. This isn’t everything, I don’t think.” She fidgets under Talla’s intense gaze from way up high, almost Charlie’s height. It feels too familiar. It makes Cassie want to punch something.

“Thank you and probably not a threat you should make to said husband’s wife,” Talla says but she is grinning, tilting her head on her long neck, looking at Cassie like discovering a curiosity. “Not to worry though. Little E said much the same when she came a-calling.”
“A-calling? “E left her room?”

“We left the dorm. It is a day for madness.” Though appreciative, Cassie doesn’t know how to further the conversation and she purses her lips, ready to just walk past and head for her room, when Talla asks, “Did the captain happen to mention how long we’re touching down?”

“I think it depends on the engine,” Cassie says and lets it rise like a query. She bites down on further urges to blame Gregor and bitch to a near stranger about the unfairness of life aboard Johanna, even without High Inquisitor Quincy.

“Well then,” Talla says. She doesn’t quite smile.

Somehow that’s all it takes for Cassie to agree to a walk around on actual grass in the ludicrous countryside on which their ship has landed. Talla doesn’t ask the captain for permission and it endears her to Cassie somewhat. After two years of the flat desert around the dorms and the windowless room she shared with Cassie, the wide world still manages to seem like something brand new. There is still an overwhelming palette of grays and browns reaching across the land but then there is green, too, and it soothes Cassie’s eyes like a dream, like the fall of the Blue across her pupils. It is almost enough to forget that there is a danger out there in the seven seas. That in the grand scheme of things, no matter how much Cassie runs and runs, she is still the one left behind with a billion others.

“You think the whole country is like this by now?” Talla asks.

Cassie thinks about clarifying whether she means the silence or the dryness, the tufts of weeds that peek out from the ground or the lack of people, or even the way the
land stretches out so far it hurts to look at, but it isn’t worth the effort or the lack of answers. “Probably shittier,” she says.

“Gregor always said you were a ray of sunshine,” Talla says but she is smiling, lips and teeth and dark eyes, just like Charlie. The sight of it is enough to put Cassie back on edge, suddenly certain that Charlie’s spent many a night at Gregor’s just yammering away about how hard life is with an uncommunicative sister but she still loves her or some other sort of passive-aggressive horseshit.

She spits, “He also say he’s a dirty liar?”

Talla tilts her head again, this quick, appraising movement accompanied by a careful gaze. “I’m sorry,” she says and this time her smile is different. “He meant it with fondness. That man wouldn’t know what to do with an ounce of malice in his body. He likes you. I’d take it as a personal kindness if you’d just take it easy on him. He’s more sensitive than you think.”

Cassie can feel her face go red and the mix of embarrassment beneath the anger only lets the rage win out. She has to look away. It’s not my fault, she tells herself, fists balled. As soon as she thinks it, she stops being so sure. She thinks about heading back into the ship, closing the door. Instead she looks back to see that Talla’s stopped watching her, moving to squat instead.

Talla runs her fingers through a patch of dark green leaves that bristle beneath her touch. The small needles along the leaves’ spines close in and grow small, shrinking away from the sun, from touch. It is unexpected. It is comforting. Cassie knows the feeling well. Looking out at the desolate land and the endless sky, she lets the wind wash
over her and wonders, always wonders, if she can stay here, away, and disappear into herself for good.

“The dorms were my home, too,” Talla says abruptly. She continues playing her hands over the foliage on the ground, leaves closing beneath her touch. “We’ve been there so long I’d forgotten there was a world beyond. I know the doc still sees sick people from the spores but maybe one day things will go back to normal, you know?”

Cassie swallows. She wants to say, meanly, I do know but we are going to die, to say, honestly, We were supposed to be safe there, at the factory, but it was not supposed to be home, but the upset still rolls through the base of her spine like she needs her bones to crack, to stumble the blood loose through her limbs with impact everywhere, thrown fists and wild kicks. She takes a breath and tries to meet Talla’s eye like a normal person, like someone whose sister wouldn’t complain about her. “Uhm,” she says. The thought enters like a slap and it is just another thing she will not say: At least you still have Gregor. She settles for saying a quiet, rough, “Yeah.” She knows, bone-deep, that the only reply she would get back is simply, And you have your sister. Charlie is still here, with you. For you.

“Well, anyway,” Talla says, standing back up, “we’re here now. I’ve been meaning to ask, with your crew one down, is there anything I can do to pick up the slack?”

Nobody says Quincy’s name much these days and it leaves shapes like holes in each tidbit of conversation everyone seems to sweep over, collectively. Cassie stops too often to wonder if that’s what would happen if she left crew, left ship, (left home). “Pick up the slack?” Cassie parrots unkindly. “Q was pilot, not a housemaid, and the captain
and I have got the bridge covered.” Talla wisely decides not to correct Cassie on the fact that she hasn’t been allowed near the bridge since they lifted off. Cassie knows she’s only being asked because everyone else is busy, because Cassie is just as lost and unmoored and useless as Talla, who isn’t even on crew.

“Is there some kind of primer to not offending you?” Talla asks. Her question is not unkind, her expression open. She looks like Polly, like the Bunker Mother who wanted to provide authority and boundaries that went with her worried eyes and pitying frowns until Cassie bit her and Polly gave up.

Cassie stares back blankly, wanting to be mean but remembering blood at the back of her throat, closed walls all round, and the feel of the pavement as each foot slammed down, sprinting to freedom. This is not a dream and Cassie is not alone, but it is still the end of the world. Grasping at straws, she is tired and tries for nice. It comes out brusquely. “Why does the grass do that?”

Talla blinks. “Excuse me?”

“When you touched it. Why does it do that?”

Moving back into a squat, a single graceful movement like liquid falling, Talla points at the patch of grass that’s shrunken and seized. “Oh, well, this is *mimosa pudica*. *Pudica* is Latin for shy. My mother called it touch-me-not. It’s sleeping grass. That’s what it does. It’s kind of a defense mechanism.”

“You studied plants?” Cassie asks, still standing, her shadow falling across Talla whose hands roam across more of the leaves.

“For a bit. The leaves close at night and open again when the sun comes up. They close if you touch them too, even if you blow really hard. Here, try it.” Talla reaches up
unthinkingly and tugs just at Cassie’s pinky and ring finger, a warm, dry touch. Cassie pulls her hand away as though burned. She still thinks briefly about going back to the ship, aborting the conversation, but Talla looks up, unemotional, undemanding. Cassie cops a squat obediently and sighs. At her side, Talla stares until Cassie looks over and then wriggles her eyebrows. She says in a low, breathy voice, “Now, don’t you go falling in love with me just yet.”

Cassie pushes Talla’s shoulder so she goes toppling over, but she’s laughing and Cassie fights a grin. “You’re married and mad,” she says grudgingly.

“And happily so.” Crossing her legs atop the dry foliage, Talla points back at a patch of sleeping grass. “Go ahead, touch these leaves right here.” Cassie hesitates out of habit of going against any direct order. Curiosity wins out and she reaches out. The leaves shrivel, folding up like the closing of a paper fan. Talla chuckles. She explains, “The long of it is boring and all about cell pressure but the short of it is basic defense. Some herbivores prefer less startling meals. Pesky insects can lose their footing easily and move along with their lives without harming the plant, too.”

“Huh,” Cassie says. She touches at leaves, one by one, until the full patch of weeds have darkened and disappeared.

“Can’t eat it, though,” Talla says. “Doesn’t cause rash or illnesses through air or touch.”

“Then what good is it?” Cassie asks.

“It doesn’t harm people but it can kill off other plants by overtaking their territory.” After another few moments she adds, “Extracting stuff from the roots can
neutralize cobra venom or something, I think. That wasn’t exactly the stuff they taught us at the university.”

“That’s…less shitty.”

“Only just.”

Cassie thinks Talla might be less shitty than a lot of other people so it starts to feel just barely okay. The rage seeps out of her bloodstream, sinking to the bottom like silt, left to wait to be stirred up again. She does not smile back but she also does not pull out every single plant, root and all, so she supposes it comes out a thin draw. She touches the closed plants like something precious and she thinks, in time to her heartbeat, I know, I know, I know. Maybe not everywhere has to feel like home or running as long as she can close up, as long as she can protect herself.

The moment goes fast. Charlie comes bolting out the hull door, corkscrew curls flying, yelling something Cassie doesn’t want to hear. She watches her own fingers curl in the sleeping grass. The leaves have no defenses left. They do not do a damn thing. Talla stays seated and Cassie pretends she cannot feel the weight of her strange, unreadable stare.

“Doctor Hong,” Talla says in her calm, steady voice. “We didn’t wander very far.” The way she says it is almost part reprimand, said like the end of a discussion.

Charlie shields the lower half of her face with a handkerchief, spotted with bursts of red roses. Her words are muffled. “I need you two to please get back in the rover and head straight for the infirmary.”

“Captain’s orders?” Cassie mocks.
“My orders,” Charlie says and her voice is practically frantic. “We aren’t at the
dorms anymore. We don’t know what the air is like out here and the black mold is still
out there releasing spores, all day, all the time, okay? We need to test you two. I’m sorry
but I’m going to have to insist.”

Talla takes a last long look at Cassie. She gets up and dusts the seat of her pants.
“I was careless,” she says to Charlie. “I thought since we’re so far from the coast…”
However Charlie reacts, it silences Talla very quickly. “It won’t happen again,” Talla
says.

“Cassie,” Charlie pleads. “You’ve seen the people who come to the station for
meds.”

“They breathe it all the time. We were out here for ten minutes. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine!” Charlie shouts, though it’s dampened by the fabric over her mouth.
It is both better and worse than all the other times Cassie has run away, and this time she
wasn’t even trying. She wants the fight. She wants the break. “This is not fine,” Charlie
says again like she is having trouble holding onto her words. She waves her hands. “If
those mycotoxins get in you then there is nothing I can do but keep the symptoms at bay
until I can’t. Do you get that?” Cassie wonders if Charlie has always resented Cassie
being made to come back. If she thought Cassie should have just stayed away. Charlie
splutters. “Do you want to die?” she practically yells. The familiar rage boils over. Cassie
to want to say yes, to spit it in her sister’s face and die on her watch, wracked with palsy
and coughing up blood. She wants to run so far that her sister can never follow.

Talla puts her hand on Cassie’s shoulder and doesn’t so much as grip as she does
clench. “It was my idea,” she says. “Your sister was only being nice. We’d both
appreciate you running a test for us, doctor.” Just like before, Cassie’s not sure how she ends up side-by-side with Talla, but she sits obediently in Johanna’s infirmary, watching her own blood fill tube after tube for testing. Charlie appears to be calming herself down through sheer will, sitting at some small machine and moving around the blood vials and a pipette. Talla doesn’t say anything, doesn’t look at anyone. Cassie thinks about Charlie yelling and she wishes she had run. When she looks down, her hands are stained with dirt. There are still sleeping grass nettles pressed deep into her palms.

They had a launch once, the Hong girls. The seas had turned black with the fungi meant to save the world from the fallout of nuclear war, that devastation so many claimed would never again darken mankind’s histories. There were futile attempts to save the world but there was too little money and the poison reached too deep. The ships were built instead. Oren Hong and William Conway were shoe-ins for the First Wave. Cassie’s genetic makeup guaranteed her a seat on the ships leaving what everyone was already dubbing Original Earth. No one ever said it but it was as if some collective “they” thought Cassie could finally do something in the new world, alongside her fathers, her sister, things they would have never considered had the black mold never spread. It could have been an honor. It could have been salvation. But just the possibility of such condescending praise was like cold blades dredging lines down Cassie’s back, exposing muscles, shredding veins.

She fled from the holding compound with a new backpack and a stolen pair of running shoes, an almost luminescent white. Everyone was asleep or anxiously pretending to be, huddled in one room like waiting out a hurricane. Cassie had worn her
backpack for five days for this moment. Everyone was showing their apocalypse-induced quirks and so one thought a thing when she went to the bathroom with every remaining material possession in tow. There were guards posted to keep protesters and desperate crowds out. Nobody was keeping the First Wave passengers in. Cassie found her way among those camping out around the perimeters of the launch prep site, the crying and the angry, men and women and families. She walked back to the city along the road like someone resigned to fate but her heart beat out of her chest like a prisoner freed. She didn’t know Charlie was following her until the next morning when she woke in the alley she’d deemed safe the night before, her sister sitting next to her and rummaging through her own matching backpack like she was keeping watch, like she had been there all along.

Cassie never tried to shake her from her tail for all the threats and insults she hurled her sister’s way. Charlie ate Pro-V like a champ. She didn’t lead nor advise. When Cassie found the Pro-V factory and signed up for a job neither Hong had eaten in two days. Charlie used her new neural implant while Cassie ate and ate and ate. She didn’t ask if Charlie was using the Blue to watch the first American ships lift off and leave, faraway and forever. She didn’t want to know. Her spoon scraped the sides of the Pro-V tin as she held back the words and the arguments: *Why didn’t you just stay on the ships? Why didn’t you just leave? Why didn’t you just let me leave?*

Evening meals in the commons have become a habit of sorts for most of the crew now that they’re flying without jobs or stops. On normal runs there is a regulation of
breaks and meals taken. *Johanna* is a good ship but she is still older than anyone would like to admit: having all hands and eyes making sure she runs steady is just part and parcel of a transporter’s job. Nobody on crew is a transporter anymore. Now, the captain gets her meals delivered in the bridge – Cassie has still not been asked to pilot -- but everyone else gathers for quick bites, all together around the table…except Cassie. It is not so easy for her to forget that they are all homeless and on the run, even for a few moments. All anyone talks about is work and inventory and Cassie cannot contribute to that small talk, even if she wanted to. There is nothing keeping this crew together except survival and Cassie has become expendable again in the grand scheme of things. It is not a stasis she prefers to remain in as long as she has a choice. She will not wait for anyone to build a grudge. She will not wait for anyone to leave her behind, not if she can do the leaving first. That will be easier with more distance.

“Is that all you’re eating?” Talla asks, watching in something less than horror as Eiji opens a can of Surf ‘N’ Turf Pro-V and starts to eat it raw, walking through the kitchenette where Talla is busy cooking.

Eiji says, “It is a time of rations.” She waits and is generally bothersome to the room at whole until Talla hands her a plate to take to the captain. Eiji stays in the bridge as she sometimes does during meals. Lately all anyone’s said about her is how relieved they are she hasn’t been having attacks since they left the hangar. Cassie is indifferent to their statements; it doesn’t concern her.

“Food’s up,” Talla says. She laughs when Gregor hugs her from behind and pontificates on her culinary prowess. Charlie takes a picture of them through the Blue even though she doesn’t have a blog to post it to anymore. She probably does something
disgusting like save all the files and look at them every day because that is something Charlie would do.

Cassie grabs a plate and heads for her room in the crew quarters. Some days Charlie follows. Not today. The test results on her and Talla’s blood samples will still take another few hours to process and Charlie assured them they would be taking several more tests for the next few days just to make sure. Cassie is pretty sure Charlie is still openly mad and it is an unfamiliar situation, though not entirely unpleasant.

The crew rooms all look the same: ten foot by twelve foot enclosures, rivets along the gray walls like Morse code, furniture that folds out from the walls, a bunk low to the floor with a sliver of a mattress. Cassie has not been in all of the other crew rooms but she’s seen enough to know the others actually decorate their spaces and make it their own or something, like Gregor’s pictures of Talla taped to the wall near his pillow or Eiji’s tech wall and sprawl of dumpster diving treasures. Charlie’s room, which Cassie has been in exactly once, is an organized mess like their dorm back at the factory, with cute animals on every surface and unfolded clothes hanging from spaces in the wall pull-outs. Cassie’s room aboard the ship, just like the dorm back at the factory, had been decorated by force when Charlie pushed her way into Cassie’s room just enough to masterglue print-outs of some of her blog photos. Cassie knows her sister would have had to sneak her way into admin’s office for a printer back at the factory, risking getting both sisters kicked out of the only safe place for miles and miles. She tells herself that’s why she leaves them up. That and the fact that the leftover blobs of masterglue would be worse than the pictures.
Cassie eats with her head down so she doesn’t have to look at them. The photos are weird. In one Charlie’s face smiles out, all sunlight and paper unicorns, having shot a picture in some reflecting surface somewhere on ship. Atop her head and shoulders are small pink animals that vaguely resemble tigers. Eiji stares blank-faced next to her, looking very put-upon, a small purple octopus in hand, held out to the camera. There’s another of Suo and Quincy talking in one of Johanna’s outer corridors. Suo is bent over in laughter and Quincy is looking at the captain, exasperated but smiling. One of Gregor and Talla posing with their arms bent over their heads to form a single, giant heart sits nearby. There is even one of the entire crew, Charlie excluded, everyone mid-grumbling, some blinking, many mouths open, and Cassie suspects it is Charlie’s favorite because it is the biggest of the bunch. All of the same pictures hang in Charlie’s room in exactly the same order.

Cassie chews Pro-V mechanically until her jaw aches. The crook of her arm still hurts from being stabbed with needles all afternoon in the infirmary. Do you want to die? She looks up at Charlie’s smiling face in the photo nearest the bed. It has been a week of these people going on with their lives with purpose. Only Cassie has nothing to do. She tears down the photos until her nails strain to breaking on the masterglue smudges, until the photo paper starts to come off in thin strips, ripping through faces and smiles. Do you want to die? She sits among the wreckage in her blank, drab room, listening to the engine settle and creak somewhere high above. She throws the scraps of paper to the ground and sits in bed with her knees pulled up. At the next stop, Cassie decides, she is leaving the crew. It is time to be left behind, on her terms.
At night the ground turns black like a crop of shadow pushing out from the sand.
The sky stretches in a murk of moon and stars and edges out the dying orange flames
descending towards the horizon. Suo grits her teeth, hard enough to rub blunt against her lip. Looking out the windshield she knows it’s time to stop flying. It’s not like Suo would have anyone to answer to if she kept right on going, but she lowers the yoke obediently, too many of Gregor’s patronizing lectures on Johanna’s limitations creeping into her thoughts. The ship glides to a drag and a stop. “Alright,” she says to herself, shaking out the cramps in her long fingers. Nothing answers her.

The empty bridge isn’t quite lonely but sometimes the silence is rough. Q had a rule about necessary personnel on the bridge, not that anyone listened, but sometimes it worked. It’s not like having Hong Two as a co-pilot would be some melodramatic wrong fit but… Suo sigh and watches the controls as each light goes out, gauge dials falling. It’s not worth thinking about. The spread of the control panel is warm to the touch. Atta girl, she thinks instead. It is always a struggle not to throw Johanna’s thrusters back into gear, to take off just because she can, because she has this beautiful ship to let free in the skies. Alas. She knows she’d do better to take care of the old girl in the long run. Something half-trained Cassie is not ready to do. That is what Suo tells herself.

Grounding the rover allows the crew to get some shut-eye anyway — it takes all hands on deck to keep the rover in the air most of the time-- but for an insomniac captain all it means is restless soliloquies and breaking down little E’s door for last resort one-sided conversations. There aren’t many other options, and even fewer that are remotely
appealing. It’s hard enough admitting that the rounded, metal walls of Suo’s precious ship can’t be enough for her all the time.

Other than that, going outside is a primary temptation but the good doctor has given a lengthy presentation on air contaminants, the ship’s filtration system, and the effects of the myriad black fungal spores on the fragile human body upon ingestion or inhalation. (To say nothing of the use of tiny animals in said presentation, which left a lingering and powerful impression on the degeneration of a human nervous system.) As captain, Suo has no choice but to issue firm orders against exiting the ship without express permission and it stands to reason that she cannot violate her own orders for something as frivolous as a much-needed romp. The doc can get testy about petty things like tomfoolery and dying.

Stewing over the fact that she has begun taking multiple orders from her own damn crew Suo stalks out of the bridge. Talla is in the commons, long legs folded up beneath her as she reclines on the sofa, smiling peacefully in greeting. “My compliments to the chef,” Suo says, tipping an imaginary hat, carrying her long empty tray to put in the kitchen. The dark yarn tangled up in Talla’s fingers does not escape Suo’s attention but she tries carefully not to see it, any of it. She convinces herself the discomfort is simply indigestion. Only Talla can fry up a wad of Pro-V and make it melt in your mouth. How could Suo resist eating her small portion so quickly? Indigestion.

(Quincy is not supposed to have left any of her yarn behind. She was supposed to have moved her buckets to the dorm she shared with Clarence, entombing her things there while she went gallivanting off into the sunset with stick-up-his-ass Jack and little Clarence with the unfortunate name. And yet the “FREE” bucket still sits in the
commons. Someone has unearthed it from where Suo had stuffed it beneath the sofa, the round lip sticking to the hard underside of the cushions. Suo does not think about Quincy."

“A just reward for a smooth flight,” Talla says, tipping a pretend hat back.

Suo tries to think of a joke about a monocle to go with the top hat bit but it eludes her so she grins back lopsidedly instead, arms akimbo. “After our laborious journey comes to an end, I’ll make sure it is known, far and wide, that you singlehandedly kept this entire crew alive with your cooking.”

The two women have always gotten along because Talla is always game to Suo’s humor. “In this scenario I imagine you intend to be ruler in the brave, new world?”

“Only if you’ll have me.” Suo pats at Talla’s calves to move and takes a seat on the tough sofa cushions. “We should’ve had you and your cooking on crew from the start.”

Talla tilts her head and stops playing with the yarn. Her lips twitch up in that knowing way and Suo winces and recovers by pushing her lips into a duckbill. “I walked myself into that one,” she says, eyes on the ground. “Sorry, T.”

Talla is the most patient, forgiving person Suo knows and so she is the one who holds out her string-tangled hands and says, “Show me how to play that ridiculous game Charlie taught you. E taught me wrong. Probably on purpose, now that I think about it.”

(Quincy hated that stupid string and it made Suo love it all the more.)

Suo is neither patient nor forgiving. She will not – cannot -- touch the yarn. “Some other time. I’ve got rounds to do.” Standing, she reaches out to flick at Talla’s forehead lightly, lovingly. “I’ll be sure to evict G and then you can play whatever games you want.”
Talla’s laughter is soft and appreciative. “Aye, aye, captain,” she says. Her look is too close to understanding, too close to apologetic, and she keeps her hands on her lap until Suo turns away. Suo cracks her knuckles against her thighs, one at a time, as she walks the ship’s hallways, boots clomping. She thinks, *Stupid yarn. (Stupid Quincy.*) She never could come up with any good yarn puns.

Turning into the engine room, Suo announces herself, saying, “Captain in engine room. Very important. Stop working. Help me think of a yarn pun.”

“Bite me,” Gregor says, his lower half submerged into the lower workings of the colossal engine through a gaping hatch door.

“Not a pun,” Suo declares. “Bordering on insubordination in fact.” She squats near the opening and examines the greasy workings. “And duct tape. Lots of duct tape.”

Gregor doesn’t even scowl. He mops at his hands and forehead with a filthy scrap of cloth, only succeeding in swirling around the black and brown stains into new patterns. “Get me to some kind of dump or shipyard and we could get some welding up in this place. We’ll stop having to worry about falling out of the sky for a good six months. Maybe.”

“I’m more worried about life support. How’re we looking?” Suo asks.

“No big worries on that front. Air will keep pulling as long as we keep the electrolysis going. Water recycling is holding.”

“No big worries,” Suo repeats, “but there are worries?”

Gregor hauls himself out and drags up his boots so he can sit on the edge and close down the hatch. For a very brief moment it seems he feels he needs to choose his words carefully and Suo braces herself against the wound that gushes open, split skin and dead,
black blood. (She knows that is Quincy’s doing, that she has trained this crew to respond to her stoic mannerisms first and Suo’s natural charm second, but then Suo does not think about Quincy.) The crew isn’t used to the actual captain running rounds yet, even here, back at the edge of the end of the world. Gregor keeps wiping at his hands ineffectively. “IATVs aren’t meant for this wear and tear. You gotta stop plugging her so hard or we’re grounded.”

“Until you can get some new parts or what? Quit shaking your head, G, water ain’t coming out.” Suo doesn’t bring up the fact that they are running on borrowed time, which is essentially borrowed food or whatever. They need to find somewhere safe to scavenge and soon.

Gregor doesn’t laugh. “New parts would help,” is the answer he settles on in the end. It is far too diplomatic for Suo’s tastes.

“Get me a list,” Suo says. “Maybe E can help with that. For now, you’re done for the night. Johanna isn’t going anywhere and your wife is all lonely and playing with yarn. Save us all from the sad sight.”

“Captain,” Gregor says and Suo wants to groan, to slap Gregor on the arm like she saw some of the other crews in the hangar do, just slap and laugh and everything is alright. She’s heard this tone before, the way Gregor used to turn in his reports and rounds to stonewall Q and her serious, serious face. “Johanna isn’t meant for…I don’t mean to…it’s just…”

_Fucking Q._ “Spit it out, G.” She already knows what he’s going to say before he says it. She’s been wondering who would be the first to broach the topic. She never
would have guessed it would be docile, doting Gregor. Cassie, definitely. Eiji, probably.

Never Charlie —

“Where are we going?”

She says, “Somewhere safe.” It is the only possible answer to the question. There is always supposed to be a mission, a directive. There are always orders that must be followed. A captain can never show fear lest she lose her crew, lose her ship. There hasn’t been anything to fear for so long but Suo cannot say that, say any of it. She doesn’t try to digest the way Gregor’s face wrinkles and lengthens. “Go grab some rest.” She gesticulates rudely. “Have some sex. That’s an order.”

“I don’t really think you have that kind of authority,” Gregor says. There is a ghost of a smile. Suo misses that the most. The crew is not the same. They are all so scared, too.

“You’d thank me if I did,” Suo says, waggling her eyebrows. It is marginal relief that she can breathe as she walks away. The weight of authority presses down on her shoulders, threatening to break bone. She never wanted that kind of responsibility again, not after the protests. Suo climbs the ladder rungs to Eiji’s door and knocks flat-palmed, a series of staccato slaps. It takes a few seconds but she gets her a reply in a loud bang, as though something has been thrown at the closed door.

“Alive and awake,” Gregor translates.

“Good enough for me,” Suo says. She walks with him down to the crew quarters before she informs him that Talla’s in the commons. He rolls his eyes and Suo knows it’s not his fault but Q was always a goddamn bad influence with that stupid, practiced eye roll of hers. (Only Chelsea was immune. Suo boxes that thought in a hurry.) Passing each
dorm she notices that Cassie’s door is firmly shut but she doesn’t bother knocking. Any
day now that temper of Hong Two’s is going to blow sky-high and Suo knows she
deserves the brunt of it…but she won’t instigate that yelling match if she can help it. Ah,
she thinks. Maybe I would. Hong Two can be fun when she’s sputtering for words. She
needs to learn how to laugh at herself. Suo grins openly at the thought.

Heading on to the infirmary she stops to lean in the doorway, blinking under the
bright lights. She knocks against the open door. “We’re down for the night, doc.” She
sticks her head a little further in but holds her body along the boundary line. Stepping
foot in the medical bay is something the captain tends to avoid these days. It’s not a
superstition. It’s not like she dislikes the needles or the antiseptic smile. (It’s the last
place she spent with Q on the stupid ship.) It’s not anything.

“Just finishing up some work, captain.” Hong One’s smile is toothy and sweet as
always. Suo has always been secretly relieved that there are two Hongs, both with the
same initials, because if it was one or the other she would have to struggle over her usual
endearments. (No one else in the world is supposed to be C. Suo carries around that
considerable hole in her heart and mind like a live grenade.)

“Work?” she asks. “This late? I will not tolerate it.”

Charlie laughs like Suo knew she would. “I’m not sure my captain should be saying
that.” She resumes her work still grinning. A thick swath of striped fabric is wrapped
against her hairline, pushing back her short hair. As always, the doctor is pristine and put-
together, calmly sitting on a chair at the back of the bay, facing a small monitor set into
the far wall. The Blue is more than useless without the factory’s local server. Eiji’s ship-
wide system is still intact on comms and basic work-related files thanks to her cataloging
campaign, but the resources are limited and spotty. Charlie touches at her headband and keeps typing with one hand. “Anything I can help you with, captain?”

Suo scratches her nose. The doctor is usually a stickler for concentration where her work’s involved but there doesn’t seem to be any immediate work to attend to at the moment. It’d be easier to shoot the shit if circumstances were different. There is nothing Suo would like better than to talk about anything apart from work. Everything is high-tension. Everything screams to matter. But these days Suo is alone in her authority and so she doesn’t get the luxury of laughter. She hates to ask but there is no longer a human buffer for these tedious workaday interactions. This is her life now. She forces herself to ask, “How’re the test results?”

Charlie makes a thoughtful noise, pulling up something else on her screen. “I’m waiting on them now actually. The equipment’s acting up. It’s not the same without the Blue so it’ll be a while now. Wanna wait with me?” Truthfully, Suo would like nothing better than to turn around and leave, barring the possibility of a normal conversation that she’ll never get now that they’re all so adrift and floundering. The test results do not interest her. They only add to the growing stash of fear that must, at all times, be fervently ignored.

Charlie flaps both her hands in a “come here” motion and it dooms the captain. Suo is a sucker for pretty girls who haven’t done a damn thing wrong in the first place. She enters the infirmary gingerly. She leans on the wall behind the doc and watches the computer monitor process and load in infinitesimal bits, more information she doesn’t want to think about. “How’s your sister? Haven’t seen her all day,” she says to distract herself.
The doctor hums a noncommittal response. “She’s being a bit grumpy about the…earlier incident.”

Suo pulls gently at one of the Charlie’s curls and watches it spring back into place. Talla had been in the definite wrong for leaving ship at all but Suo kind of gets why Cassie followed. She’ll have to go talk to her after all, see if she can get her on the bridge again and feeling useful. Maybe Suo won’t have to go back in the bridge at all after a while. “She’ll get over it,” she says blithely, patting Charlie’s arm. The doctor chuckles, a rueful yet polite sound, a trickle like a faucet, on and off. Suo asks, grinning, “What?”

“Nothing,” Charlie says.

“Come on, I won’t tell her,” Suo says. This is a world away from skeins of abandoned yarn and the rising argument that had hit the walls of this very infirmary, words flung so hard Suo wondered why they never caught spark on Johanna’s surfaces. “It’ll feel good, watch.”

“I don’t mind her being grumpy,” Charlie says and smiles so her dimples show. It is a clear end to the conversation. It is what Suo appreciates about the doctor: all the exclamation points and cartoon hearts bracketing her speech. She doesn’t push it.

Hovering for another few moments that stretch comfortably, Suo gets tired of looking at screens and keeping quiet. (It is not because she can still hear Quincy’s yelling at Suo in the infirmary bed. It is not because she had the last words, like a spoiled child, like tiny Suo before all the talks from Mama Hasunuma, manners first). Fidgeting, she pats the doctor on the head, a motion she cannot usually accomplish with Hong One standing at full height. “Okay, well. You come get me when those results come in then.”
Suo retreats to the commons. Sitting and trying to rest never goes well, despite her endless attempts. She goes through each cabinet and drawer in the kitchen and reorganizes tins instead, polishing silverware. She doesn’t let the aches and ghosts come out to play for another few hours, until she can be sure the crew is asleep or at least out of the way for the night. (Chelsea only creeps out from behind spiked walls when Suo forgets to hold the stones in place through sheer force of will, when insomnia grips and nothing seems real. The memories never get through, not truly, but Chelsea’s face—sprawled in laughter, upended in anger or passion in the exact same expression—appears like an epileptic vision. Chelsea never looked much like her baby sister, or maybe it was the other way around, but when it happens tonight Suo can’t be sure who she sees in that agonizing flash.) Hunched forward on the matted sofa, surrounded by dented silverware and Pro-V tins, Suo cradles her head in her hands. “Fuck,” she says out loud, just to get it over with. The sound doesn’t travel far. She says it again, once more with feeling. “Fuck.” It doesn’t help. Nobody ever prepared her for this shit.

Early in life little Suo Hasunuma had received a fair amount of Serious Talks with her mother, Ayira, all accompanied by mountains of reading materials and backlogged video resources. There had been a memorable early discussion about Suo’s dark skin, which made her stand out among her pure Nipponese classmates despite the growing demographic of interracial couples in the long homogeneous colony. A longer talk emerged from that not long after on Suo’s kinky hair and her aesthetic options that were up to her alone, as Ayira stressed so seriously.

There had also been several talks on the birds and the bees, including a straight-up primer received at age eight on what parts go where and the myriad protection available
now that birth control was strictly governed. Ayira had given birth to Suo late in life and she was fiercely unabashed about every subject under the sun. Suo nodded and sang loud songs in her head for the entire talk. A second talk came not along after and involved some backpedaling on Ayira’s part after Suo loudly announced she would be marrying the prettiest girl in her neighborhood, Yui Asato. There was an immediate and elaborate wedding in the works, evidently. Suo was only slightly less horrified by the sudden explanation of non-reproductive lesbian sex. Not much later Ayira was there to stroke Suo’s back when Yui Asato spat that she would never get married. She was going to live with circus wolves.

The thing Suo remembers the most is how her mother made Suo keep her hands on the table during all these talks so she could monitor what made her daughter uncomfortable and then swat the shame out of her. Even the Nasibs always said Suo’s hands were her tell. Chelsea wasn’t much for physical affection but she’d squeeze Suo’s fingertips in passing, always managing to still them if only for a second. On the other hand – ah, Suo thinks, that was a good pun -- Quincy liked to swat Suo’s hands out of the air mid-gesticulation like an ornery kitten distracted by sharp movements. Suo almost starts to grin but the pain gets there first. It’s the problem with remembering.

Suo gets back up. Maybe the meal trays could use a second washing. (Ayira had given plenty of talks on life and death, world’s end and love, not that the two were always connected. Chelsea’s forever absence Suo could talk about because they had been fighting for a cause and the loss was finite, done with. There had never been a single talk from Ayira on what to do when one’s best friend has left you, will never return.)
Suo cannot let herself think about, about any of it. She does not have her own Blue link, but she does have all the old archival maps their factory admin ever kept in their possession because no one ever bothered with the storage rooms but Suo and Q. She spreads them across the table her crew sits at for meals, eyes searching, searching. She thinks bodies of inland water were crucial in the First Wave launches…but maybe it had been water towers. She knows there was water. Launches needed lots of water because it helped keep something from vibrating too much. Suo closes her eyes, takes a breath, taps her fingers relentlessly for something to concentrate on. It’s not like she’s searching for launch sites. (It’s not like she’s looking for Quincy.) Suo tries to remember as many old factory sites as she can, dreading finding more Pro-V to eat for the rest of however long ever is, hoping they’ll find more variety of rations.

The clock above the table is broken, stuck at just past six. Suo doesn’t know what time it is when Eiji wanders in but she startles, noisily uprooting several old maps, when Eiji sidles up next to her and points at a mark Suo’s made, asking, “What’s that?”

“A good way to get yourself shot,” Suo says conversationally. “We need to put a bell around your neck. Teach you how to announce yourself.”

Eiji doesn’t so much as change her posture or low-toned voice. She keeps walking towards the kitchen cabinets, talking like she’s reciting a ship diagnostics report. “I, Mistress, Queen of the Universe, am now accepting all tokens of fidelity and servitude—”

“Yes, yes.”

“— so long as they are accompanied by oaths of eternal devotion and full-length sonnets on the spaces between—”
The stairwell down to the lower floor is noisy on Johanna’s best days. Suo ignores
Eiji and lifts a hand in salutation when Hong Two enters the deck, bedraggled and
squinting. “Morning,” Suo says. She reassesses her statement. “What time is it?”

“—my toes,” Eiji finishes. “It is 4:13.” She has opened a tin of Pro-V and begun to
scoop it out with her fingers, eating it raw. “Have you come to pay your respects?” she
asks Cassie who hovers warily in the doorway.

“What?” Cassie asks.

“We need to ration those, barbarian child,” Suo warns.

Eiji points an orange-stained finger at the sprawl of papers across the table. “Not if
that’s where we’re going.”

“Is this what you woke me up for?” Cassie asks, voice scratchy.

“You didn’t eat dinner,” Eiji says. “Come cook for me.”

“That is the stupidest piece of shit answer ever. I’m going back to bed. Cook your
own damn food.”

“I wasn’t hungry earlier,” Eiji says, and Suo isn’t so sure the two are having the
same conversation anymore. “I know you can cook.”

Suo isn’t surprised when Cassie grumbles, never having made a move to actually go
back to her room, but starts to roll up her long sleeves anyway. Hong Two has spent an
inordinate amount of time staking out Suo’s dorm room and weaseling her way in just to
sit and bitch about a certain someone’s teaching methods and her own future as a factory
pilot, on Johanna or otherwise. It followed a sort of set pattern of Cassie gesticulating,
Suo making jokes at her expense, and then Hong One showing up all smiles and
apologies, taking a seat next to her sister like it was right where she belonged. If Charlie
made so much as a request, Cassie would do everything in her power to ignore it so 
blatantly even Suo felt the slight. However, if Suo jokingly asked for something, Hong 
Two was sure to put on some big show of unwillingness and then get down to the task 
anyway. For all her posturing and vulgar space pirate swagger, Cassiopeia Hong is a 
surprisingly easy read. (It is the only thing Quincy ever grudgingly respected about Suo: 
hers ability to read people, whatever that means. But Suo does not think about Quincy. 
She does not think about Quincy.)

While Cassie bangs around cookware and Eiji keeps up the steady stream of 
nonsensical monologues she seems to save up for late nights and especially for Cassie’s 
stonewall responses, Suo returns to her work. Some of the papers still bear the archaic 
state divisions that gave way, after the war, to the use of hubs. Danger zones were easier 
to mark along east coast when there were only whole cities to evacuate and tag. Factory 
hubs are scattered at equal intervals among the residential districts. Suo counts hubs and 
odies of water, lakes and rivers and reservoirs. She doesn’t think of the black mold, not 
really, not so long as they’ve got the rover. The tin can metal of Johanna’s walls and 
systems of cool recycled air fill her waking thoughts. (She tells herself there is no room 
for Quincy among the rubble.)

The spaces behind Suo’s eyes burn and pull, the way they tend to when signaling an 
hour or so before sunrise. She still remembers days cooped up too close to a drop-off, a 
pile of stolen blankets on the ground, and a single window with sunlight streaming 
through. (Chelsea was there in those days, but never in memories, not any more.) Suo 
does not fill her reminisces with names or faces or true memories, only spaces. The better 
to keep out the agony.
Eiji drops onto the metal bench across Suo, one leg pulled up. Her tray has a pile of Surf ‘N’ Turf arranged in the shape of what may have once been a very tiny T-Bone steak. The whole slab is covered in dark brown gravy powder that Suo knows for a fact is part of Charlie’s personal hoard. Three minuscule lab crop potatoes, soggy from months in a can, sit atop the whole concoction, pale and wet. Suo’s never seen those on ship before and it dawns on her that Cassie must have some secret stash of her own, (though probably less secret and more intimidatingly marked and labeled). “It’s a bird’s nest,” Eiji says at Suo’s quizzical stare.

“Of course it is,” she says. She notes that Cassie’s tray has only an uneven, shapeless mound of matching Pro-V and no gravy or potatoes. “What a softie,” she teases and grins bigger when Cassie only stares back with a full mouth and dead eyes. “A true token of fidelity and servitude.”

“Your tray’s on the counter,” Eiji announces like a small child tattle-telling. Suo will not admit to being delighted when Cassie drops open her mouth and begins to chew very slowly. She’s had Cassie’s cooking only once before, back at the apartment after a truly regrettable night of drinking with Hong Two and her many, many complaints. The girl’s food rivals Talla’s.

“Sonnets are still welcome if you want to regain your pedestal,” Eiji offers.

“Tempting,” Suo responds. Across from her she can see the way Eiji’s toes curl up from the bench, exposing the dirt that cakes her soles. “The spaces between your toes are very filthy.”

“I suppose I could also accept filthy limericks.”

“I’ll try to rhyme dirty with something other than flirty—”
“Please stop. What are you marking?” Cassie asks. She rubs at her eyes but her attention has moved less sullenly to the maps on the table, a single finger tapping at a point on the page.

“It’s the old West-19,” Suo answers. She stretches and goes to stand and eat at the counter, pleased to discover luxurious placements of gravy and potatoes atop her tray.

“Factory town.”

“Pro-V?” Cassie asks.

Suo nods. “Amongst others. Good place to load up. Maybe we’ll get lucky, pick up more potatoes. Your sacrifice will not be forgotten.” The food is good, really good. “G needs some parts to keep our girl in the air anyway.” She flicks her chin Eiji’s way. “You willing to make a run?”

“Not particularly.” The answer comes quick and instant.

Suo chews on a potato slowly, the waxy starch soft against her teeth. It is such a welcome novelty and relief from the often tough, chewy Pro-V that she actually slumps, weak-kneed. She composes herself enough to ask, full-mouthed, “Thought it’s been a while between attacks.”

Eiji almost smiles. “Think again.” Suo taps her fork tines along her tray. She knows she’s not the only one suffering from lack of pilot. She doesn’t know what to say.

“I’ll go,” Cassie says. “Not doing anything else on this ship, am I?”

“If you’d leave your room we might make a decent housekeeper of you yet,” Suo says. She considers this noun. “Shipkeeper?” She doesn’t mean it. She just likes the way the left side of Cassie’s face curls first before she frowns, like a wave, like a feral dog pouncing. She’ll talk with the girl about restarting pilot lessons again tomorrow.
Eiji rattles her utensil against her metal tray. She points at more marks on the map.

“These all factory towns?”

“That’s what we’re going to do, captain? Just try to live day to day until the ship falls apart? Until the food runs out? That’s the fucking plan it’s taken you this long to come up with?” She doesn’t wait for an answer. “And of course you’re not going to discuss it with the rest of us. Just do what you want and watch everyone leave one by fucking one. That’s what you want, captain, isn’t it? Jesus.” Cassie throws her fork onto her tray. Pro-V splatters in low, orange arcs.

“Problems?” Suo asks. She refuses to be wounded. She thought finally allowing Hong Two out on a run would soothe over the past slights, the scabs little Cassie refused to let heal. Maybe if Hong Two could prove herself Suo would feel better about trusting her with an entire ship way up in the air. She can read Cassiopeia Hong like a children’s book but she doesn’t trust her yet. She sees the way she looks at her big sister. She knows who the Hongs were back when the world and everything mattered. Little Cassie thinks
she can read Suo right back, throw the Nasibs’ turned backs in her face. It doesn’t hurt her. It doesn’t.

Cassie opens her mouth, still looking exhausted but willing to fight back. Suo’s been raring for a fight, but not with Hong Two, not with any of them still on ship. “Q was training me to fly,” Cassie says like it’s something she needs to expel, foul-tasting and making her sick from the inside out.

“When she left you still weren’t ready.” It’s the closest anyone’s really gotten to talk to Suo about Quincy Nasib’s spectacularly unspectacular departure. There had been an attempt -- Suo knew the second Gregor’s sour, unwilling face showed up on her doorstep, the one he makes when the women on crew gang up on him and he’s not quick enough to laugh it off. The crew may know Suo’s laugh and Suo’s drunken tears, she’ll give them that, but they do not know the holes in the past, the chunks torn out with bare hands, swallowed whole again because there had been nowhere to put the memories. No one can find what isn’t there.

“She didn’t say that. Q didn’t say that,” Cassie says and because Suo is not fucking blind she knows exactly how much Hong Two looked up to fucking Quincy Nasib who showed her nothing but contempt and disdain. Suo levels her back with a stare, hating the way she’s hurting this stupid young girl on her crew with so much to learn. All she’s ever wanted is to make Cassiopeia Hong laugh, to make some kind of memory that wouldn’t make Suo flinch and grimace when she tried to cover so many maws with papier-mâché moments. But Cassie does what she’s always does. Her face aborts its movements towards truth and swings, full force, back into hateful rage. Suo knows she will never be forgiven for this moment.
“We could find a launch,” Eiji says. Suo does not look at her. That girl has a hell of a way of making statements she doesn’t even believe sound a lot like We could find Q.

“We. Like we have any say in the decision. Like we’re all in this together.” Cassie huffs out a noise. “We’re not. There’s no reason any of us are on this goddamn ship except to keep that fucker from being alone. Are you done?” she asks, standing up, tray in hand. Eiji shakes her head. Cassie leaves. She doesn’t look back. Suo knows the girl. She knows Cassie wants to.

Suo chews on the tips of her fork, pulling herself back together, working her way back up to a smile. She quirks an eyebrow Eiji’s way. “Still stand by your initial opinion of that girl?”

Eiji spears her last potato and examines it in air. She settles the full weight of her unnerving gaze on Suo for less than a second, flitting away again, a thousand different landings. “Yes and no.”

“That is not an actual answer.”

“Didn’t know she was a cook then.” Eiji never quite smiles. It is a vague movement of her jaw and the lower half of her face. Teeth show, lips curl — but it is not a smile. Suo still counts it as a victory. It’s more than she could coax out in the beginning.

Suo slumps down in her chair. Her body is tired and her mind feels it, too. It’s the shutdown that’s the hard part, the raising of walls, the mechanics of play-forgetting. She’d rather not think about it. “I think that only covers the ‘no’ portion of your non-answer.”

Eiji takes the potato into her mouth but doesn’t chew it, holding it in place like she’s waiting for it to melt. Eventually she does masticate the root, seemingly
disregarding Suo the entire time. The captain returns to her maps. Eiji savors her food. When she speaks again it both picks up on the previous conversation and seems to veer into a new direction. She says, “You know she’s not going to get any better if you don’t let her do anything.”

“She never completed her training,” Suo says, still sore despite her previous private decision to reinstate Hong Two. She tries to remember where the blockade on the drop-offs ended, the wonders if they encroached even further before the last launches left. (She tries not to think about sitting in on flight lessons with Quincy and Hong Two, laughing at the insults traded until Q couldn’t hold a straight face and got up to push Suo out, the door closing but not in time for Suo to hear Q spit laughter, see Cassie just start to grin, trying to be part of something, a moment.) “This ship can’t go down any sooner than it needs to. G’s complaining enough with me at the bridge.”

“She could watch you. You know Q was a shit teacher. Cassie’s a fast learner with the right teacher—”

“And what exactly did you teach her? Camera Spying 101?”

“You don’t even let her on the bridge anymore,” Eiji says. Her face is the furthest from a smile it can get.


Eiji gets up and takes her tray to the kitchen. When she comes back to the table she takes a seat on Suo’s bench and looks at the maps one last time. “What time is lift-off?” she asks.
Suo refuses to take the comments as an accusation. She knows she can’t be the only one who sees the world, the past and present in the holes that appear in the timeline, the faces better left unremembered. “First light,” she says.

The footsteps padding toward the door stop and rustle and Suo braces herself for something barbed and acidic. But Eiji is not Quincy. “Captain,” she says. “Earlier on rounds…” It would be bullshit to expect an apology so Suo doesn’t know what to expect at all. “Was Talla supposed to be on crew with us?”

Suo says, “I allowed your set-up for security purposes.” Eiji stares back unrepentant. Suo still remembers meeting Talla and Gregor in the dorms for the first time. Talla and another fellow -- an older man, wheelchair-bound -- were researchers for the factory’s admin, helping to process certain crops into Pro-V supplements. A scientist on board would have meant more runs, longer hours, and less city drop-offs. The probability of having to put down a riot over rations would have dropped to near nil. Suo hadn’t been the only one to see the appeal in taking Talla on crew. She hadn’t been the one to veto the idea, though, the one to remind the captain, herself, that inter-crew relations were an imbalance not to be tolerated. (Suo forces the holes in the memory, the shadow shaped like Quincy, the dark curl of a lip and an eye roll that hearkened to Jack’s absence on ship, to Gregor’s presence, to a crew dodging gunfire with priorities skewed.)

Eiji stares at the floor for a long minute. “That would’ve been nice,” she says finally and leaves the room silently.

Suo goes back to the bridge and starts to program coordinates. She keeps the door shut. She can only handle the bridge when it is empty and ringing. There may be spaces and holes cast in her memories and heart, the best way to excise the pain at its source, but
the holes do not need to be filled. Suo watches the dawn break through Johanna’s windshield. It colors the sky like spilled blood sweetening. Suo rests her head but she does not sleep. (The holes aren’t real. They don’t exist. She still sees Chelsea in her dreams, whole and frightened, blood soaking her front from the pole through her sternum.)

“Alright,” Suo says. Her crew looks motlier than ever in their protective gear of gloves and helmets and breathing apparatuses strapped to their backs. “It’s an in-and-out mission. G and E will rummage for parts.” It is not meant to be a dig at Cassie, but it doesn’t help that Eiji is ashen and avoidant, flinching at anyone who comes too close or tries to adjust her gear. “Some of these factories were Pro-V once so they had to have rovers at one point. Keep track of what you want to bring back. If it’s too heavy we’ll circle back with the dollies after, but I want a scoop-and-run so you make sure you know where exactly you leave shit.” Gregor nods and salutes. Eiji pushes at her fingers, cracking knuckles, even when they’ve stopped popping and must ache beneath the pressure. She shifts from one foot to the other, back again, back again, but she nods once, swift and hard.

Suo continues. “T and Hong Two will look for rations with me. With luck we won’t have to split, but in the case that we do, don’t take any can that looks compromised: no puffed tops, no cracks or hard dents. I don’t care about missing labels, I just care about botulism and food poisoning. Doc will stay here and test out everyone as they return, no exceptions. We hose down in full hazmat form, we take the three-day blood tests every time we leave this ship. Any questions?” Blank faces stare back through ill-fitting bright
yellow helmets. It is a sorry sight. “Right,” Suo says. She knows her crew used to stand rigid, at attention, cowed by a far fiercer force, (well, save for Eiji. Her slouching posture remains the same). She tells herself it can be better this way. She is too tired to fight Quincy’s ghost, hovering against all of Johanna’s walls, watching the way she always did.

Their ship sits on the cracked airfield just outside the tight cluster of two dozen or so industrial buildings crammed together in this district. Suo heads out of the ship first, expecting the others to follow. She concentrates on how much she hates hearing the sound of her own breathing reverberating back at her in the close confines of her hazmat helmet. The glass plate in front of her eyes fogs around the edges whenever she exhales but the air through the suit’s system is cool and steady. The air is what matters.

“Alright,” Suo says as they approach the outermost building, what looks like a control center for the empty airfield. The comm systems in each suit are simplistic and staticky. “Who needs a rousing and emotional speech from their great leader to get going?” Watching Gregor go by with Eiji on his back, Suo loses the start of the facetious verbiage she’d had posed on the tip of her tongue. It’s a quicker breakdown than she was expecting. It doesn’t give her much hope for the rest of the mission, even if she would never say it out loud. The primitive comms were intended for long-term missions in clean-up and emergency situations that did not allow for switching mics on and off. It means that the whole crew can hear the stutter and speed in Eiji’s loud breathing.

The mission already feels very wrong. Tension is too high, which means mistakes will be made. Suo knows she could call this whole thing off. She could order everyone back in the ship, make them get Johanna back in the sky and far, far away --
“Will our leader’s great speech be told through song or interpretative dance?” Talla asks, very quietly.

Suo grins. “Both, if you ask nicely.” She keeps walking, no hesitations. They need the food. The crew won’t survive without food. She looks over her shoulder at Cassie, holding a huge, empty canvas bag slung around both arms. “Here’s the part where you ask if I’ll do neither if you ask really nicely.” Cassie pushes past, hips and elbows angling to jab and bruise. “Hey, come on, Hong Two, what’s wrong?”

“I have a fucking name,” Cassie throws back.

Shit, Suo thinks. She was never good at apologies. Maybe she’ll let little Hong fly the ship outta here just to make her feel better.

The first factory building is a husk of silent machines and heavy chains rusting midair. Talla shadows Cassie noticeably but Suo doesn’t comment on it, taking the second and third floors for a quick survey that yields no results. The next three buildings are just as useless, empty and eerie and stone-still. Searching through each of the rooms and factory floors is a simple enough task but traipsing between each building proves hardy. The dirt is thick and loose and every few steps someone trips over a clod or something, stumbling forward, scattering red-brown clouds that make the glass panes on their helmets go foggy and stained.

They all spend the trek listening to Gregor mumbling to Eiji, the ragged breathing yet to slow, but the three women do not converse with each other, silently motioning and nodding as they survey each building and come up empty each time. Suo gives updates to Gregor as they enter and exit each building. “G,” she says. “Perimeters are a bust. We’re going to start heading inward. Maybe some other scavengers didn’t wanna get in too far.”
“Alright. We got a potential over on the north side. I can see six, maybe seven ships parked together,” Gregor says.

“How long would it take you to crib some of their parts?” Suo asks. The trio crosses a pathway into the district, away from the airfield and the open skies, now surrounded on all sides by broken windows and the faint beige-pink exteriors of each building. The dirt beneath their feet billows up in puffs of red like fired clay.

Gregor’s voice comes through far-off and sticky. “Could be. Models will have to be pretty recent for a good match but either way we can make do.”

Cassie stumbles and swears to the empty city at large. She cuts in caustically.

“Fucking dirt, can’t even fucking walk — G, why would they be so far from the hangars? The ships. Why wouldn’t they be out on the airfield if this was an evac?”

Suo flicks the girl on the back of the head, the thick material of the helmet negating the action entirely. “Do you want to stay in the air?”

“No, actually —” Cassie snaps, sarcastic and prickly.

“No, actually —” Cassie snaps, sarcastic and prickly.

“Oh, we could always just pick up a new ship if ours is in such bad shape.”

“—I don’t. You said we were going to make our own place. Why not here? Why do we have to keep going to who knows where—?” Cassie gestures around wildly.

“A new ship?” Suo says, very softly, like Talla’s just suggested infanticide.

“Are you even listening to me?” Cassie yells. “What the fuck is the point of a captain who doesn’t even listen to her fucking —” She trips one last time.

Nobody hears the projectile over the yelling. All Talla and Suo see is Cassie’s stricken expression, swiped clean of all anger. Red dirt rises in a singular puff, a fairy
ring ascending. The net pulls and tightens before Suo can understand what’s happening. Limbs tangled, Cassie still yelling at the same decibel somewhere above her, Suo waits for the dust to settle. “G,” she says quietly, and she can’t tell if the loud breathing is her own or Eiji’s. “It’s a trap. Don’t come, you got me? Not even for T. Go back and guard the ship with the doc.”

“Watch the grounds,” Talla adds. “There’ll be more traps.” Suo can’t see more than Talla’s butt and lower back but she can hear the tamped-down fear in her voice, her attempt at control falling somewhat short.

“I gotta go in for the parts,” Gregor says. “We’re on our last legs with our lady.”

“We’ll find another way,” Suo says. “Go back. Now.”

There is the slightest hesitation. “Talla,” Gregor starts to say before the comms swipes and there is an indiscernible mumbling that has to be Eiji. Gregor talks back quietly and when his comms gets loud again all he says is “You keep each other safe.” His breathing changes like he’s broke into a sprint.

“Always do,” Suo says, like a leader, like she believes it. Above her Talla grips at the material of Suo’s gear, crumpling it in her fists. Suo can’t be sure if it is a rebuke or an admission of unchecked terror.

When the air starts to clear, it is easy to see the figures lining the tops of each of the perimeter buildings and even further in, like they’ve been waiting. There can’t be more than twenty of them, as far as Suo can tell, although their height and the weapons they hold make those numbers seem pretty awful. Suo forces a grin and tries for a rousing farewell speech. “Well, kiddies — ow!” Cassie presses and kicks out at the thick cords of netting like a beast captured, managing to strike at Suo several times and it’d be a wonder
if it were an accident. “Would you quit it?” Suo says. “It is a net. This is what it is
designed to do. Calm down.” She pauses, adds, “That’s an order.”

“Fuck you!” Cassie yells, still struggling. Suo doesn’t reprimand her if only because
the general proclamation carries and echoes and maybe it’ll scare someone, if not the
intended recipient. It makes her start to laugh a little, hearing Cassie’s voice bouncing
from wall to wall, one hundred Fuck yous, going round and round. If she sounds a little
hysterical laughing, it is because she is.

“Jesus,” Gregor says into the comms. “What is happening?” Eiji says nothing.

“Captain,” Talla says in warning.

Fifteen feet above the ground, dangling like a many-limbed morsel, Suo and the
others watch a single land vehicle approach, streams of dust trailing like war banners.

“Ah,” Suo says. “Okay.” Adrenaline soaks straight through her bones. She was a
protestor in the old days, not a warrior. She takes one breath, then another, and it doesn’t
feel like it’s ever going to stop. She forces herself to exhale and it comes out shaky,
riding a laugh. “Hey, T, you think they’ll prefer the song or the dance better?” she asks.

“Captain,” Talla says again, warningly, sounding watery.

An exorbitantly tall man exits the rickety vehicle and several others, men and
women alike, fall in step with him, forming ranks around him like bodyguards. “Why
don’t you all do that?” Suo wonders, gabbing for something to do, clearing her head. “Is
it the height?”

Talla muses, “Could it be the singing and dancing?” Her fingers are still clutching
at Suo’s gear, pulling upward and it makes Suo want to struggle away, to pull away as
though there’s somewhere to run.
“It could never be the singing and dancing,” Suo assures her. It takes some twisting but she pats at one of Talla’s clenched hands and regrets it when she gets stuck in a far more awkward position. She tries to straighten herself as best she can in the net but, resting at the bottom of all three bodies as she is, all she manages to resemble is something close to an eel. Clinging to the ropes with both hands, back arched beneath Talla’s butt bone and what is partly Cassie’s knees when she isn’t kicking, Suo takes another breath and holds it. She was a protestor, damn it, but she is a captain now. There’s no real difference when she thinks of it. Words are still her primary tool, not weapon. Helplessly, she calls out to the approaching man and his entourage, flashing a smile she doesn’t feel. “Hello!”

“Hello,” the man calls back, sounding near jubilant. He tosses a thick hand into the air and waves it, fingers scrunching up and down.

“Hello!” Suo yells back again. It earns her Cassie’s knees pressing down very deeply into her lower vertebrae. “Would you be so kind as to let us down from this unwieldy booby trap?”

“Only if you’ll be so kind as to explain what you’re doing in our unwieldy town!”

It’s answer enough for Suo to feel threatened. She grips the ropes a little tighter and hauls herself up, unseating Talla somewhat. The man stands with his hands on his hips and his face turned up to expose his white moustache in all his glory. When Suo suddenly matches the man’s hearty laughter it must be realistic enough because Cassie audibly groans. “This is how people die,” Suo hears her explaining to Talla. “We’re going to die.”
To her further credit, Talla only says back, “Or get eaten.” It is not a vote of support.

“Pretty sure that is just another way of dying,” Cassie says, too loud.

Suo doesn’t quiet them. She’s too busy slipping out honey words and counting the holsters on hips, checking the condition of the ground vehicle, and, most importantly, sizing up the mustachioed man and the veneer over his twinkling eyes that hides something quite close to death. “You factory workers?” Suo asks. She may have just been a protestor, though the papers called her a revolutionary, but she wasn’t a leader, then and now, for nothing. She sees the way this man’s people hold their weapons. No Pro-V factory stocked firearms, not even during the war.

“Could be,” the man says. He has a dangerously thin frame, shoulders and arms exposed to the elements. The tank top he wears is worn ragged, once something close to a bright pink, stained heavy with red dirt and something black and liquid. His left shoe is wearing thin, exposing holes just above the sole seams. They’re not steel-toe. Cheap material. These people didn’t work here. It doesn’t do to wonder what happened to the people that did.

Suo says, “Well, we were wrong in assuming this district was empty. If you cut us loose, we’ll just be on our way. No harm, no foul.” On the comms Suo can hear the racket of Gregor explaining the situation to Charlie and the doctor’s quick questions. Eiji’s breathing is no longer audible, maybe because she is back on ship.

“What are you doing here, ladies?” the man asks. “And in such stylish accoutrements.”
“Why thank you!” Suo says, perhaps too loudly, as though to cover the sounds of the rest of her crew through the comms this man has no idea about. “My friend here—” Suo pats on Talla’s ass with the arm that is still stuck and losing circulation “—thought she remembered there being a Pro-V factory out this way. We were hoping to find some food.”

The man regards Talla with no little interest. “That right? You used to work out here? Knew someone who did?”

Talla wriggles and she has the sharpest ass Suo’s ever known and Cassie’s knees are not helping matters either. “Uh,” Talla says. “An uncle? An uncle.” Suo jabs her with her ineffectual wrist. The second half of Talla’s speech comes out just barely smoother. “After the war I heard my mother say he got a job in this district with Pro-V?”

Suo winces when, through comms, Gregor hisses, “Would you quit getting my wife involved in your shit, captain?”

“I’m dealing with it,” Suo mutters back darkly.

“Poorly,” Cassie says into comms, shifting hard yet again.

“Is that so?” the man asks. “He give you those suits, too?”

“It’s so. Who cares?” Cassie says. Her body is facing the completely wrong way to address the man. “Cut us down. We’re not going to take your stupid food.”

“Ain’t much to take, in any case,” the man says. Suo sees no curiosity in any waiting eyes, only open hostility etched in sunken faces that have seen nothing but hard times, and for a while now if she had to guess. The talk of cannibalism in the lockdown dorms was supposed to be an urban legend but suddenly Suo isn’t so sure. The man says,
“We worked hard to set up a steady life here. Much as I would like to extend a helping hand, I have to look out for my own.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Suo says. “We’ll just be on our way.”

Of course it was never going to be that easy. “That IATV of yours,” the man says. Everything in Suo runs cold but she refuses to let it show. *Johanna* is her blessed only.

“The Pro-V standard. She’s air-worthy.”

“She’ll be what we’re flying out on,” Suo says evenly, tone significantly less friendly. At the thought of a trade, an exchange of *Johanna* for freedom, she starts to see murder at the back of her eyelids every time she blinks.

“Captain,” Gregor says. “Ship’s locked down but…”

The man scratches the back of his head, brushes his mustache with a single finger, and looks away into the distance. “Been a long while since we got folk from the outside world. Mind if we have us a small chat?”

“There’s some guys out here,” Gregor says. “Guys with guns.” Talla grips at Suo and pulls, more demand than plea.

There is no time to give Gregor any orders. “Not at all,” Suo replies, staring down the man with a blank face, with equally dead eyes. She knows, *knows* her crew must be seeing the same edges of homicidal blackout in their visions, but there is no time or way to reassure, to make heartfelt promises. The drop down is unceremonious, the assault and tied hands insult to injury. Their helmets are ripped from their heads so they’re breathing the same hot, dirty air as these sunburned and silent soldiers. When the three women leave the vehicles after a short ride to the north side of the district they leave behind perfect imprints of each of their butts, stains of red dirt on matted backseats.
Cassie mutters darkly, “G couldn’t just fly over and—”

“And what? Hover menacingly?” Suo interrupts. Johanna has no weapons systems and definitely no snatching capabilities. “No. Push comes to shove we give up half our rations but they are not taking that ship.”

“You sure we’re getting out of here, captain?” Talla asks in a low voice. Suo knows Talla’s smarter than that, that she’s seen the emaciated limbs none of these people hide, the hollows beneath their eyes and the tint to their skins that are part malnutrition, part maelstrom of the red dirt that kicks up in every direction with the slightest provocation.

The grit and wind scratch against Suo’s eyes. She has never been so afraid of the wind and the air. She cannot let it show. “In time for dinner,” she says, grinning. She is a leader. She has to believe it.

The man’s name is Max and he sits with his long legs spread wide and his fingers interlaced over his crooked belt buckle. The first floor of this building is all debris and blown-out windows. Sitting with a half dozen guns trained on her, Suo is conscious of every breath she takes: shallow, shallow, trying to stay shallow. She remembers all too well Charlie’s explanations and tiny animals shaking with mycotoxins tearing apart nerves and lungs. It’s an effort to keep her breathing small. She ends up inhaling too deep, head dizzy. The cycle repeats.

Cassie and Talla have been taken to separate rooms on the upper floors, to be looked after and asked questions by Max’s people. The rest of the crew had come too, putting Johanna’s safety before theirs – a single bullet through the wrong, flimsy place on her scraped body and things could get rougher. The reasons for the separate
questionings could vary but Suo doesn’t care for any explanation since none will suffice. She has faith in every member of her crew to keep mum and to not do anything stupid that will get them killed. She believes in them because she knows them better than they think. They can get through this. They will all get through this.

Suo decides to suffer through her own interrogation like there’s nowhere else she’d rather be. It goes on for over an hour with Max continually being interrupted by people who bolt down from the upper floors and then book it back up with what Suo can only guess are new orders. It unsettles her, not knowing what any of that is about, but there’s nothing she can do. She smiles and waits for the next question.

Max asks after Suo’s ship and Suo’s crew, their circumstances and plight, their former jobs and former lives. Just in case a guy like him is looking for a foreign bride or groom, Suo makes sure to highlight some made-up awful qualities. Nobody on Johanna has anything to hide, at least not from these folk, so Suo answers like he’s one of the crew back at their old hangar, (back home). If Max is laughing it means he’s not ordering anyone to shoot her or her crew. It takes a lot out of Suo, bordering too close to obsequious than she’d normally care for except this time there could be lives at stake, she’s not quite sure.

Max says, “I feel for your hardships. I do.”

“Thank you,” Suo says, “but we’re doing fine on our own.”

Max brushes down his mustache the way he does when he’s mulling something over, or so Suo figures from the frequency of the habit during their conversation. “You don’t find groups this big out there, you know,” he says slowly. “World goes to shit and it’s every man for himself.”
“Aren’t many men on my crew,” Suo says, grinning. At Max’s magnanimous laughter she adds, “But you seem to be doing alright for yourselves.” She opens her arms, gesturing at the bodies gathered around the room, pressing in to listen but saying nothing. Hooded eyes rise to regard Suo when she says this. They flash away when she dares to meet each stare.

“We are a close group. We have rules and we stay together. That’s the exchange for complete safety.”

“Sounds like it’s working out for you, then.” Suo sees the bare feet of Max’s people, filthy but devoid of callouses. She sees the lack of children and the way these people will lean into each other to whisper, gazes still on Suo. She wonders how much of this is an act and also how many others are hiding in the surrounding buildings. Conversely, she also begins to wonder just how bad off this group actually is for Max to need to ask about the world outside, about any signs of havens of warehouses that haven’t been claimed or plundered.

“We used to invite strangers to stay, once upon a time. Used to clothe ‘em, feed ‘em, teach ‘em how to use a gun and patrol with the best of our’n. We made a town of this little city. Everyone knew everyone. Some folk knew how to get the machines up and running. They elected me, you know.” Max has a full head of hair and rosy cheeks. Suo spends a fair amount of her time with him imagining him in a ten-gallon cowboy hat. She is not interested in the story of how this haven of people learned paranoia. Their hearts are hardened. Their machines aren’t running. This sad man is a tiny king on a throne that does not exist. Max says, “Lot of folks, they find us here, happy accident. We didn’t like to leave people out in the rain, so to speak.” He taps at his belt buckle. Suo watches him
straighten in his seat. He says, “You seem like nice people but we just don’t have the room. Haven’t had a sickness in a good six months but you never know what strangers will bring in. I’m sorry but there are rules.”

Suo does not flinch, even with echoes of Quincy’s shouts through her mind and the blossoming of bruises all across her lower back from Hong Two’s vengeful knees. She notices Max does not mention food, does not even ask about their supplies even though he must be wondering how a crew like Suo’s could possibly be getting along. She notices how everyone in the room keeps absolutely still. “We aren’t looking to stay,” she says. “You asked for a chat and we had us a nice one, I think, so if we could—”

“Then how about a trade?” Max asks. The man speaks calmly, river water over rocks, but his tone reeks suddenly of desperation. It doesn’t seem like much of a request with a roomful of mostly armed men and women.

“A trade.”

“Whatever your people in the ship took from us in exchange for some of your supplies. What was it? No harm, no foul.”

Suo sighs. She can feel her thick braids sticking to the back of her neck, the humidity in the building gathering like low-hanging mist. Trickles of sweat make her itch and she wipes irritably at her temples with the backs of her hands. She feels like she is breathing poison and it just makes her angrier. “My crew followed orders. Once you and yours made yourself visible, I ordered them back to ship.”

“Empty-handed.”

“Empty-handed.”
“Is that so,” Max says. One of his people, a lanky woman who takes the stairs two at a time, comes down from one of the upper floors and stands next to Max, her back turned to Suo. She leans down to talk, hands braced on the table. Clean fingernails, soft palms. No gun. Just like all the other frantic runners from up above. The two whisper back and forth for a minute that drags on. When the woman leaves again Max gets up and comes round the table to offer his hand to Suo. “I was mistaken. I appreciate your patience. You and yours may not find what you’re looking for out there. We’ve looked, miss. There are no safe ports. I wish we could offer you more hospitality but I have my people to look after.”

Suo wouldn’t nest here even if she found the rest of the wide world razed and poisonous to the touch. “That’s kind of you,” she says, “but I’ll look after my crew just fine.” She stands without Max’s help and spends the rest of the walk back to the airfield expecting to be shot, straight through the back of the head, one last hole to feel and feel but never see. (She can practically hear Quincy bitching and hissing, *This isn’t right. This is too easy,* and she knows. She *knows.*)

The others catch up not long after, each flanked by a group of Max’s people so that they are one giant mass moving through the district’s walkways and breaking out into the spacious, empty airfield. The sun is lower in the sky than Suo cares to see it. *Johanna* sits peacefully amidst the wind that picks up yet more red dirt, coloring her hull as though claiming the ship. Suo tries to snake her way through a bushel of people to where Eiji is walking. She can see one of the girl’s hands digging fingernails into the elbow of the opposite arms, drawing actual blood. Suo’s pushed back and all is chaos and blood orange clouds.
She doesn’t see Talla until they’ve found their way back to Johanna’s backside, Gregor working at the cargo hold door’s passcode. “Okay?” she asks lowly, aware of all the bodies at their backs. Their escorts are still crowded in close, like they expect to get on ship with the crew. Either that or go in for a last embrace. Suo doesn’t relish either prospect.

“Like to say I’ve been through worse,” Talla says, slipping her arm through Suo’s and Suo sees the way Talla’s crowd moves in with her predatorily. Talla squeezes Suo’s arm, hard. “Let’s not make this a habit in our travels, captain.”

“You don’t think a pack of scary sociopaths is going to wind up being the anomaly?” Suo starts scanning large patches of the crowd to count out her crew. Cassie is still further back, nearing the edge of the wider crowd. The doctor is nearer, walking fast, unsmiling.

“Not anymore, no.” Talla moves with her and Suo can see very clearly the way the men and women behind Talla move on the balls of their feet, swaying like a single organism.

Suo tries out a smile but she’s still trying to hold too many variables in her head, watching the doctor corral Eiji, scanning the crowds for Max, and breathing, always breathing in the air that may or may not be fatal. Traps, she thinks frantically. Traps. “Just a little longer and we’ll show tail,” she says. She hopes it doesn’t sound like a lie.

She disengages Talla’s arm. “Just a while more. Hang in there for me, T.” Johanna’s door opens with a sigh.

“Captain,” Suo hears Charlie say from somewhere to her left. Suo slips up for just a second, thinking the doctor wants to say something about Eiji. The variables start to
break down. Suo looks frantically for E but the tech looks only stressed but not breaking
down. She’s holding up as well as any of the rest of them. She looks back to the doctor,
trying to convey that she can wait to hear about Eiji until they’re all back on the ship,
until –

“Captain,” Charlie calls again, more urgently this time. More people seem to be
pushing between each of the crew members. “Captain, where’s Cassie?”

Suo knows she saw Hong Two just a second ago. She turns to look and sees only
the faces of strangers, emaciated and tired. Another turn and Max is in front of Suo, hand
outstretched.

“Thank you for your visit,” he says quietly, smiling.

This could be easy, Suo thinks, already reaching for his hand, knowing in her gut
it is the wrong move. They could just let us go. Let all of us go. She can’t even convince
herself. She wants to look for Cassie again. She wants at least her crew to get away.

Max’s grip tightens. Suo doesn’t have time to say anything, to shove Max’s fake
gratitude right back up his bristled moustache.

“Hold ‘em!” Max cries and twists Suo’s hand in his, a wrenching that makes
Suo’s bones sing, a pain so bright it blanks out her vision just long enough for Max to
turn her and sneak a blade beneath her chin. “We don’t want to kill you,” is the first thing
he says and Suo fights against the knife until the pressure worsens, the metal biting into
her skin.

“You all going to fit on my teeny-tiny ship, Max?” she ekes out, ragged and soft.

The scope of the world may have shrunk for those left behind but it doesn’t
change the fact that no one on Earth was deemed “necessary” for any of the launches.
They were all left to die. Suo isn’t surprised that a man like Max says, simply, “We don’t want your ship, miss. This is our town, our home. We aren’t going anywhere.”

Suo knows these people have their own ships, huddled together just the way Gregor found and left them. If it is food they are after, it means they’ve scavenged every factory in a radius of several hundred miles. Going out further was probably too dangerous. A roaming rover stocked full of supplies and landing on their airfield must have seemed like a pretty gift, ribbons and wrapping paper. “What happened to no harm, no foul?” she asks, not really caring for any answer this man or his people can give.

“That was when there wasn’t a trade on the table, I’m afraid,” Max says.

Men and women walk onto Johanna, tracking in red dirt and who knows what variety of potential bacteria and mycotoxins. So much for the safety procedures, the hose-downs, and hazmat. Suo stops fighting Max’s grip and holds still, watching (the way she taught Chelsea and Quincy after her and Quincy should have been here. It is a thought she cannot hold back).

The other crew members have guns to their heads, a range of firearms, bulky to miniscule. Logically Suo knows what she’s seen: these people are not soldiers, are barely survivors. She would be surprised if any of these firearms are loaded, if they even work. But the knife to her throat is real and when she looks out at her crew she knows she is not willing to chance her own observations. Eiji’s lips are thin, face so pale, and Suo watches her for a second, counting the breaths Eiji pulls too quickly through her flared nostrils. At the far side of the door, Gregor has been thrown to the ground and pinned, a shotgun to the back of his head. Suo knows he can handle it but next to him is Talla’s pretty face, tear-streaked and, Jesus, the sight of that leakage almost undoes Suo because
that is the most unfair sight of all…or so she thinks until she can find Charlie. The doctor’s head is being pulled back by her short hair, her fabric headband falling forward over one eye. Mouth agape, Charlie catches Suo watching and Suo can do nothing, *nothing*, when Charlie shivers, full-body, and starts to cry, holding in the noise but the sounds and sobs move her body anyway, a full possession.

Suo can only turn her head enough to see Cassie out of her periphery: Cassie who is standing amidst a crowd of blurred bodies, no gun to her head; Cassie, who turns to her captain, unfettered, and lets a band of violent strangers remove hauls of Pro-V and medical supplies, personal belongings and God knows what else, from their desecrated home.

“A trade,” Suo murmurs, understanding, *hating*. The knife does not for one moment go lax.

“We weren’t looking to take on any new recruits to our little community,” Max replies. “But your girl drives a hard bargain.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.” *This is karma*, Suo thinks meaninglessly, catching flits of memories that she pushes away just as quickly. It doesn’t matter, any of those little things – the way Cassie looks down at the control panel, drinking in the complexities; how she rearranges her food on her plate into landscapes and abstracts; the way she only looks at her sister when a flash of guilt crosses her face – it doesn’t matter because it is done. The deed is done.

The crowds leave with their plunder. “That wasn’t so hard now, was it?” Max asks. He lowers his knife and pushes her away. There are still a good two dozen different gun barrels pointing at Suo and her crew. Suo looks to Cassie first but she is gone again
and Suo knows that, even if she stops to examine the crowd at large, she will not find Hong Two, not ever again. “Best be going now,” Max says. It would be kindly if Suo weren’t bleeding steadily from a stinging line beneath her chin.

“Fuck you,” Suo says. She heads for Charlie first, picking her up from where she’s crumpled to the ground, staining her pants legs and smearing red dirt onto her wet face. It is like quieting a wild animal. “Let’s go, doc,” she says lowly. “We gotta go now, we gotta go.” She can feel all the gun barrels on her back. She’s not sure these people won’t shoot.

Charlie puts up a fight, wild eyes searching for her sister. “I’m staying with her,” she says, the words coming out jumbled. Suo has to look away, hoisting the doctor up bodily. Charlene Hong and her family were a fixture in the news and media before the war. Picture perfect. Look at her now.

“You’re not. I can’t. I’m sorry.” Suo says it all, eyes averted. She’ll take the resentment later, the faux forgiveness too. Charlie’s taller frame makes it hard for Suo to hold her back but Suo’s kept in shape since the war. She hauls a screaming Charlie towards the cargo door. There is no room for surprise when Eiji takes Charlie’s other side and starts to pull, securing the doctor between them.

“Get in the engine room. If they didn’t strip anything crucial, I want up and out, record time,” Suo says to Gregor who falls in step, bruised and covered in red dirt. They haven’t been shot yet and that is something at least. Suo takes a breath that she regrets immediately after. She tells herself her voice is not trembling. That would be ludicrous. Captains do not show fear. “T, I need your help. I need you to stay with the doc for lift-off.” The cargo door closes behind them.
Charlie wrenches her body and twists, stumbling into Suo face first, sobbing. Suo runs a hand down her long back. “Shit,” she says into Charlie’s sweaty forehead. She knows she’s getting blood all over the doctor’s pretty face. “Shit. Doc. We gotta fly. I gotta fly our girl. T.”

Later she will not remember making her way to the bridge. The sky is dark when Suo looks down and sees the crusted blood down her shirt front, across the control panel, along the yoke’s gray contours. She is confused to discover that she is still wearing the yellow safety suit but not her helmet. Her head aches, a pain that flares out from behind her eyes, making its way back towards her neck. It takes her too long to read her own flight patterns. They’re not even going in the right direction. Too far on this path and they’ll hit a drop-off. Suo concentrates on remembering her maps, on reconfiguring coordinates. They don’t need to find a safe spot just yet. All that matters is getting away, far, far away from men with dead eyes and people that are all too willing to jam bullets into Suo’s crew.

Sky and land blurs into one until darkness comes again. Night covers the land and Suo knows they should stop for the night, that she should put her girl down so they don’t fly headfirst into some mountain or other even with their floodlights on, but she keeps imagining shadow figures emerging on rooftops, her crew growing smaller and smaller…

“Captain,” Eiji says and Suo flinches. She hates those silent entrances, that moment of recognition of being caught unaware. She can’t shake it. Slip-ups like that weren’t allowed in the war, during the protests. That’s how people get caught and arrested (that’s how people get killed). Pain flares across Suo’s throat and when she
reaches up to touch it her fingers come away flaked with blood that’s gone rusty-brown. For a second she cannot remember where the blood could ever have come from.

“Don’t do that,” she says. Pressing her fingertips together she rubs off the mess.

“What is it?”

“T wants to know how much longer.”

“Why?”

Eiji slides into the co-pilot’s seat. That used to be Suo’s seat. She knows how comfortable it is, the worn-in contours of the pill-shaped cushions stacked together like so many loaves. There used to be a knitted cover for it, bright teal. (Suo remembers the day she came in with every intention of trashing the whole damn bridge only to find herself calmly removing the seat cover and folding it small, removing all the paper animals without ripping them against their adhesive, cleaning Johanna of every vestige of Quincy like it was that simple. Eiji had come down that day, too, late in the day like she had been expecting carnage herself.)

“Not okay back there?” she asks.

Eiji clears her throat primly and folds up her legs so she’s compact in the chair, hands playing with the loose safety buckles. “T just wants you back there when you get a chance. Said she’s not sure if she should sedate the doc. There’s only an emergency stash that didn’t get taken. Charlie hides it under her bed.”

Suo swallows around the lump in her throat, down and down, like she can make it go away if she tries hard enough. “She swinging at anyone?”

A firm shake of Eiji’s head sends her long hair down her face. “Just crying. She’s not--” She’s not Cassie. Suo almost wants her to say it. “She’s not,” Eiji says firmly. She
never really looks anyone too long in the eye so Suo can’t be sure it’s disapproval she reads in the lines of the girl’s small body or just plain exhaustion.

Suo touches her neck, forgetting again. She murmurs, “Shit.” The memory of Charlie’s wrenched face is still too fresh. “This is fucked.”

“They would’ve done it even if she hadn’t made a deal,” Eiji says. 

Suo knows that. She knows… but still. “She wouldn’t have made a deal if—” She doesn’t know how to finish that sentence. It’s my fault, she thinks and two Nasib girls peek out from gaping holes of a tattered heart. “She shouldn’t have,” she says. Both hands slam against the yoke and the rover shudders. “Fuck. Fuck!” Suo presses her hand to her mouth and squeezes, exhales, releases. “Okay. You know what? Tell T to stick the doc. Crying’s just going to waste energy we don’t have the means to replenish.”

Staring straight ahead through the windshield, Eiji doesn’t move for another minute and Suo doesn’t prompt her. “They took our helmets off,” E says slowly, almost conversationally.

The moon rises in the distance. “Don’t you get goddamned started,” Suo says. “You’re the one saying the doc’s in hysterics so just knock her out. Put her out of her misery. Go.” Alone again in the bridge Suo grips at the yoke until every vein in her hands strain and feels like bursting. There is no rise of tears to her eyes, the windshield definitely does not blur, and there is no hot heat at her throat like regret. There’s not. Suo is captain. There is shit to be done.

In the end they spend the night just outside an overgrown forest that rises from the rocky floor like a beast in the night. The crew -- what’s left of it, Suo thinks -- gathers in the commons and stares down at Suo’s maps, at the chrome table, at the benches, their
feet, and anything but the dried blood down their captain’s neck, or the red rims at her bloodshot eyes. There’s halfhearted, monotone arguing when Suo lays out her next plan. Everyone is skittish about scouting for supplies, even if it means food. (Later Suo will do a run through the ship and see the full scope of the damage: all the open drawers and rooms thrown apart. Even the “FREE” bucket is gone. Cassie’s room is ransacked and empty and it just solidifies everything in everyone’s heads. There were orders, directions to scoop up her belongings. The pictures everyone knows Charlie put up are the only items left. Nobody is brave enough to ask if maybe there had been orders to leave those, the way there had been orders to take everything else.)

Suo knew the world would be fucked, knew it from the runs for Pro-V trades, from the bits and pieces of news brought in from the outside, from seeing the world beneath Johanna, still and dirty and dying. She doesn’t know what she was expecting – finding shelter, finding safety (finding Quincy) – but this was not it.

It is two days before Suo even sees Charlie. Charlie spends that first night knocked out, Talla and Eiji keeping diligent watch and surviving the next bout of admittedly calmer crying come the next morning. What she does the rest of the time Suo can’t be sure. She gets updates in the afternoons and evenings from the others, enough to know the engine’s still holding, and that Charlie is, too.

All Suo knows of the time between is the view from Johanna’s bridge, sleepless nights spent grounded in the quiet wilds, restless snatches of unexpected sleep just before dawn. Always, there is a hunger that stretches on, a burn, and then a pain. The crew is surviving on recycled water, a couple of forgotten tins of lab crops and Mixed Veggie Pro-V. They are going to have to stop to make a run, a real run, and soon.
Charlie enters the bridge at midday, steps light but audible. She sits in the co-pilot’s chair with a graceful motion, like falling water, so much like herself that Suo can’t handle it. Outright brokenness is doable, parts that can be put back together, but what she suspects is this show of being okay just presses down the weight of blame against Suo’s shoulders, already near the breaking point. “Doctor,” Suo greets. She wants to reach over and pat at Charlie’s head, feel that warmth and the doc’s weird, beautiful curls, make cartoon springing sounds for the hell of it, like normal, (like before). She keeps both hands at the control panel. “It’s good to see you,” she says. (*Sorry, she thinks and it doesn’t sound like Quincy Nasib, one bit. You should say you’re sorry. She can’t.*)

“Gregor showed me where you plan to make port today,” Charlie says. She looks out at the cloud-covered sky, squinting against the sun.

Suo clears her throat, readjusts herself in her seat. “Yeah? Thoughts?”

“I’m not sure it’s the best plan—”

“We’ll scout it better this time but we really need the food—”

“—I was thinking, maybe we shouldn’t be staying so off the grid for supplies. The cities will be overrun but—”

“Doc—”

“Captain, please.” When Suo looks over Charlie has her chin tipped down, eyes on her lap where her hands – strong hands, surgeon’s hands – are curled up tight. “Those people…they took the whole stock. The infirmary, all of it. Boxes of latex gloves even. Since the run didn’t…” The first time she manages to glance at Suo it is with such a helpless expression that Suo almost reaches out, ready to grasp as though Charlie were drowning midair. Charlie licks her lips and looks away instead. “Since the run didn’t go
as planned, it’s even more important we test everyone out and for that I need supplies and, God forbid anyone’s sick, we’ll need more supplies for treatment.”

Charlie is still a pretty girl who hasn’t done a damn thing wrong and so Suo leans and finds the doctor’s hand. She squeezes just once and hangs on when Charlie grips back with all the force of an internal scream. “I don’t want you to worry about this right now,” she tells her. “We’re far enough inland that I think we’ll be okay. Right now getting something to eat is priority—” Suo draws in a quick, tight breath when Charlie suddenly squeezes so hard Suo’s single-handed grip on the yoke falters…

Something’s not right. The yoke sticks, rock solid. “Doc,” Suo says in her captain’s voice. “Doc, let go real quick, I promise –” She gently wriggles out of the loosening death grip. “Hold on, it’ll be okay.” She switches on shipwide comms, the controls she usually avoids because it was Quincy had done, too. “E,” she says into the mic. The ache in her hand grinds a pain straight up to the slow-healing cut on her neck. “Gregor.”

“Already checking,” comes Eiji’s terse reply. It lacks the usual boredom at the menial requests the crew usually has Eiji run. “We’re not losing altitude.”

“Captain,” Charlie starts again. She’s begun to wring her hands together for something to hold. “About the tests…”

“Just hang on one moment, doc. Something’s…” Off. Wrong. Very wrong. “Something’s happening.” The panic reels through her mind, acrid and acid-colored, blowing her nerves apart. Johanna could fall out of the sky today. What did they miss? (This feeling is familiar. The memories come back with it, full-bodied, whole. It was Chelsea who loved to laugh through her anger, dead sounds in the dark.) Suo knocks
every dial and button, their lights already dimmed with powerlessness. “Gregor. Status.”
She holds her eyes open too wide, trying to focus through the adrenaline. “G.”

The rover lurches, just once.

Charlie goes flying from her seat, face first. When she rights herself blood cruises down the length of her face from a gash in her forehead. She touches her cut timidly and makes a tiny, helpless noise. “You’re okay,” Suo tells her quickly. “Come back to me, doc.”

“It’s fucking!” Gregor cries, faraway, hands probably too busy to get near the comms. “It’s all fucking, captain.” His words are permeated by the clicks and clanks of the engine room groaning. “It’s not anything on ship. It’s not—” Something loud squeals through his end, metallic and harsh.

“Captain?” Charlie says, voice wobbly.

“You’re okay,” Suo says. “Sit down and strap in. You’re okay.” Cutting beneath the chaos, Suo can hear Eiji’s end of the feed, almost all clacking keys and the gritty squeak of her chair. Eiji’s breathing is loud. “G?”

“It’s jammed,” Gregor says, voice much louder this time. “All of it. It’s jammed.”
He sounds so urgent and out of control that Suo begins to accept everything going to shit. The veins in her head throb in time and intensity with the dull pain in her neck. (Dumbly, uselessly, Suo thinks that it should have been Quincy flying the ship. Holes, holes.)

“Only thing up and running that I can remotely access is life support,” Gregor says after another beat, like he’s gotten more of a hold on himself.

The rover jolts again.
Charlie says, very quietly, “Nothing is hitting us. Why is it doing that? Nothing’s hitting us.”

“I know,” Suo says, watching the yokes pull themselves hard in their twin sockets, crazily circling. She splays her hands across the console, helpless. In her head, Chelsea laughs and laughs.

“It’s turbulence, right? Just turbulence,” Charlie whispers. “Captain?”

All Suo can taste at the back of her mouth is a tang of metal. She can see that rod through the soft flesh of Chelsea’s stomach, the way the blood flew from her lips, that crimson arc, that hate, all that hate – Suo closes her eyes, opens them. “E, report.”

“Something’s taking us offline,” Eiji says, almost in step with Gregor swearing in the background. All of Eiji’s screens in the bridge have gone black. The security system is clearly compromised and Suo does not know how to process this. She hadn’t really been thinking about the system now that they weren’t pulling city runs for Pro-V, for anyone. Most of the equipment was supposed to be useless without the pull of the server, how were they supposed to—Suo breathes, stilling the thoughts. There is a halting, endless moment of almost silence.

Johanna is pulled up, her yokes thrusting back.

The ship begins a steady ascent, higher. Higher.

“Everyone, strap in,” Suo says, resigned, dreading. “G, get E and get to the commons. T, if you can hear me, you get there, too.” There are no safety belts or equipment in the engine room, in the converted storage space. “Everyone, strap in and stay calm.” Shaking, pained, Suo pulls down her own buckles and tries and fails, with shaking hands, to get secured. It takes another few attempts. “What can do this, E?” she
asks. She reaches forward and touches everything on the console she can think of to try to regain control. It’s worth a try to get through the jam for a single second.

“There aren’t any betting odds on this, captain, we haven’t seen anyone in our fly space this whole time—”

“Jesus,” Suo says suddenly, painfully. (It registers automatically that she’s known this panic before, felt it from the infirmary the last time she saw stupid Quincy Nasib and fought with her over nothing, over everything. But that can’t be it. She will not say it. She wants to be wrong.)

*Johanna* rises slowly and Suo still fights with the frozen yoke. IATVS aren’t meant to travel aircraft altitudes. Rovers fly low and slow.

*Out of the sky out of the sky* repeats in Suo’s head like a stupid song.

(Chelsea smiles beatifically every time Suo blinks).

She practically yells into the mic, drowning in Chelsea’s sweet laughter, “E, I need calculations on –”

“Two minutes, forty-second minimum if we hold speed. Anything past that height and our systems – If we gain speed –” Suo can hear the start of Eiji’s hitched breaths at the edges of her words. This loss of control is too much, worse than simple steps out of the rover and into the light. Suo’s never been called in to help reign in the girl’s attacks but she’s pretty sure the only thing she can think of to say – “Pull your fucking shit together!” – is not going to do a damn thing. “We can fix this,” she keeps repeating to everyone, to no one. She knows it’s not fair to be relying on Eiji, the youngest and most wrecked person on crew (although debatable at this point but there’s no time) but Quincy is gone and Cassie is gone and those were their choices and –
Johanna slams upward at breakneck speed, alarms blaring, lights flashing in the rattling tin can the rover’s become.

The power cuts.

Daylight filters in, blue, blue, blue.

The rover evens out again. Suo undoes her belt, back protesting from the whiplash, chest slashed with the phantom pull of the restraints. The gush of blood across her teeth makes it clear she’s bitten through her tongue. The adrenaline and sheer rage will only keep the pain at bay for so long. Suo thinks these useless thoughts, swallowing hard, (remembering last kisses tainted with blood).

“How we doing, doc?” she says. “We’re doing okay, right? We’re okay.”

When no reply comes, she turns quickly, expecting the worst. Charlie is alive but drained pale. Her face is turned up to the windshield. Her mouth is grim. The bridge of her nose and downward is streaked in blood. “Captain,” she says. It comes out on a whisper.

Somewhere, the dim intercom crackles back to life. The lights come on overhead. Through the speakers, there is Gregor, distantly. Eiji’s breaths start to come tenfold, spiraling out into a full-blown attack.

In the sky, the Beetle rover waits patiently in midair, hooks extended.